

Infecting kids -- with dance fever

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Jacques d'Amboise, one of America's most-honored ballet dancers, knows "Swan Lake" isn't going to cut it with a lot of fourth-graders. So he teaches them "The Five Fingers of Death." First, you curl your fingers and thumb into a nasty claw. Then, you pound your sneakers -- left, right, left, right -- into the gym floor.

"Now, thrust your steel fingers of death through the ceiling. RRRRAH!"

D'Amboise's career has taken him to the New York City Ballet, Hollywood and even the White House.

On Friday morning, it brought the spry 71-year-old to the Rashkis Elementary School gym in Chapel Hill.

D'Amboise had his troupe -- more than 100 fourth-graders -- clawing at the sky, elbow-bashing imaginary subway passengers and pretending to crush giant bugs under their sneakers.

Call it recess meets modern dance. The point is to make kids move, and love doing it.

After a long career on stage and screen, d'Amboise founded the National Dance Institute, which now oversees in-school dance programs across the country.

With \$10,000 in grants, the institute-affiliated group N.C. Arts in Action brought d'Amboise's program to Rashkis Elementary last month.

Their goal is to start the d'Amboise-designed movement off in Chapel Hill and eventually spread it throughout North Carolina.

The fourth-graders had been told that d'Amboise, who has won the prestigious John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts award, was a legend.

Friday marked his first face-to-face visit.

With the nonstop charisma of a kids' show host, he twirled and spun, sometimes letting out excited shrieks of "Go!" or "Knees up!"

"Kill, yes! Crush, yes! Destroy, yes!" he shouted, commanding them to stomp the insects that weren't there. The wooden floor shuddered under their feet.

How did they feel after all that bug crushing? "Hot and sweaty," Khalid Williams said.

For several weeks, they have worked with their local instructor, former "Cats" performer Kirstie Spadie. She is also a co-founder of the N.C. Dance Institute in Raleigh.

D'Amboise, who lives in New York City, will return April 27 for the students' first performance.

After about 15 minutes working with a small group Friday, d'Amboise had them panting. When it was time to move on, the dancer -- old enough to be their grandfather's older brother -- bounded away to the next group.

The students just sighed and slumped to the floor.