

STUDENTS LEARN FROM A MASTER

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4th-graders at Rashkis Elementary School find class a moving experience

CHAPEL HILL -- Jacques d'Amboise stood in the center of a cluster of his pupils, instructing them in the fine art of dance. A former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, d'Amboise turned decidedly silly Friday, raising his arms in the air and doing the "hurray" dance.

After all, in a class of 50 fourth-graders -- many of them novices to the classical dance d'Amboise knows so well -- a little silliness never hurts.

"We're learning and it's fun," said fourth-grader Charlotte Costenable, after her class with d'Amboise. "Jacques makes it really fun."

The founder of New York City's National Dance Institute, d'Amboise was at Rashkis Elementary Friday as part of a pilot program brought to the school by the North Carolina Arts in Action foundation. For the next couple of months, Rashkis' 110 fourth-graders will spend two hours a week learning dance. D'Amboise, a member of the Arts in Action board, will come back to the school several times to instruct the children.

"This is a program every child should have," said Lisa Kang, executive director of Arts in Action. "The rich as well as the poor have the right to have the arts in their lives."

Within 10 years, the foundation hopes to expand the dance program to every school in the state.

Meanwhile, Friday morning, d'Amboise taught the students how to dramatically jump. Dressed in a bright blue turtleneck, a nearly fluorescent lime green sweater tied around his waist, he lined the students along a wall.

"Now run in, and jump over the line!" d'Amboise shouted.

Some jumped higher than others. They took dramatic leaps, legs flying and arms flailing, as if trying to make it over a high fence. Others took delicate hops, feet barely coming off the ground. One kid, dressed in blue sweatpants, tripped over his sneakers midair, nearly falling to the ground. He got up instantly, brushed off and continued running across the gym.

Friday's class even drew some rather distinguished guests. Mel and Zora Rashkis, whom the school is named for, stopped by. Sitting in colorful plastic chairs, the two watched dancers fly by.

"Aren't they cute?" Zora Rashkis said. "Honestly, aren't they just cute?"

Shirley Berger, the founder and chairwoman of Arts In Action, also sat in a chair watching. It was her friendship with the Rashkises -- both live at the nearby Cedars in Meadowmont -- that brought the dance program to the school.

"I could cry," Berger said, watching d'Amboise lead the students through a routine. "It's a thrill. What it does for children is incredible."