

At school and on stage



MARCUS SANTOS

Nia Robinson-Pile in "Students on Strike"

Rosie's Kids gives a Broadway boost toward vital roles

BY JOANNA MOLLOY
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Her name is Destiny. And as she twirls to Javier Colon's song "Stitch by Stitch," she seems to have always belonged here, on this dance floor, at the Maravel Arts Center amidst the grand theaters of Broadway.

Colon sings: "My scars are open, so put me back together now, stitch by stitch." Destiny's expressive hands seem to yank something out of her heart and let it flutter away. "We talk about finding things you need fixed inside you, what's holding you back," explains teacher Kyle Pleasant,



ROSALIE O'CONNOR

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Above, Rosie's Kids rehearse for "The Rosie Show." Below, Kya Brickhouse in "Students on Strike"

who choreographs the moves for Destiny and the other members of Rosie O'Donnell's Rosie's Theater Kids program for New York City schoolchildren.

"Take that energy, and let it out. Find your joy." Indeed, the faces of the 20

young dancers are lit up by song's end, despite two hours of rehearsing inside on a beautiful Saturday.

But there's extra frisson among the troupers today, because Maravel director Lori Klinger has just told them that in four days, they'll fly to Chicago to perform the number with Colon himself. They'll tape it for "The Rosie Show," O'Donnell's new talk show on Oprah Winfrey's OWN network.

For Destiny, it's a special birthday present. Tomorrow, she will turn 12, but her somber face and manner of speech belong to someone who has already seen a lot of life.

Destiny is homeless, living in a shelter with her three sisters and single mother. She shows up at Maravel three times a week, coming from the shelter in Harlem, or up from her school on the lower East Side.

Many of Rosie's Kids are working-class children with strong families. Some struggle in the projects, or come from homes broken by crime. The program — O'Donnell and Klinger planned it in 2003 at Rosie's kitchen table — brings everyone to a Broadway show, and 120 students a year are chosen to continue with after-school lessons and tutoring until they graduate from high school.

At a gala last month, O'Donnell and friends including Elvis Duran and Cynthia Nixon caajoled and prodded various Shuberts and Nederlanders to donate more than \$1 million to this effort.

At the gala, Nixon shed light on her friend's passion: "Rosie has two loves — kids and theater. As her mother did for her, she wants to share her



ROSALIE O'CONNOR

Rosie's Kids combines Broadway inspiration and schoolwork perspiration.

love of the theater with all of the children in the city. She thinks that to live in New York City and to never have been to a Broadway show is like living in Hawaii and never having gone to the beach."

Maravel opened on W. 45th St. two years ago. It's named for Pat Maravel, the teacher who nurtured O'Donnell after the death of her mother when she was 10.

The schools picked for the 15-week program are those with the most free-lunch students. Most have suffered cutbacks in arts programs, and one, P.S. 51, doesn't even have a gym.

When Kya Brickhouse, who plays 16-year-old civil rights hero Barbara Johns in "Students on Strike," the Kids' original production now at Theatre 80 St. Marks, described the conditions of her 1951 segregated school, it sounded like many New York City middle schools today. That's why Klinger,



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an ex-ballerina who worked with Edward Villella and Jacques D'Amboise, launched academic tutoring at Maravel. It's not just about learning to sing "Oklahoma!"

Rosie's Theater Kids have won coveted spots at LaGuardia and even Stuyvesant high schools.

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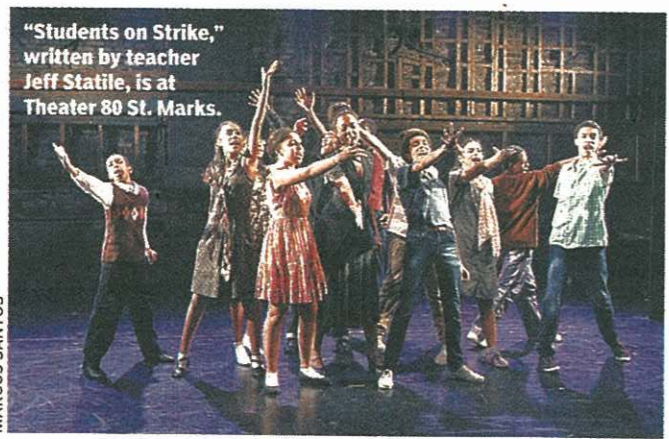
"When Rosie and I started this, we wanted to give them skills that we hoped would help get them into college," Klinger says. "But then we realized we had to help get them into good high schools. The average graduation rate at public high schools is 60%, but the average graduation rate of a performing arts high school is 95%."

In July, new academic director Lara Paquette laid down the law that tutoring would be required for anyone with a grade of less than 85% in three subjects.

"I tell them what's going on with me and they understand," said Destiny. "I can pretty much tell them anything here. And they took me to see 'Memphis' — twice! I love the flashing lights, and walking the streets around here, you see the little TVs with the shows on them."

"I know these streets like the back of my hand. I hope I can stay here until I go to college."

She returned to the dance floor, and spun a graceful pirouette, leaving no doubt that performing would be Destiny's fate.



"Students on Strike," written by teacher Jeff Statile, is at Theater 80 St. Marks.

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