



Members of the NIA Dance Troupe performing at last month's Beantown Bounce competition. The group's choreography mixes hip-hop, ballet, modern and jazz. (Essdras M. Suarez/Globe Staff)

Making their move

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For NIA troupe, dancing -- and character building -- are what it's all about

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | May 15, 2007

Thirty-three teens sweat, gasp for breath, and worry as they endure three hours of auditions to become members of the NIA Dance Troupe on a recent Sunday. The 13-year-old company has gained a fervent local following by melding hip-hop with ballet, modern, and jazz moves. Now those girls and boys, ages 15 to 18, were discovering that being in NIA means more than looking good on stage.

The auditions begin with the teens doing a series of glissades, jetes, and other ballet steps across a dance studio at OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center in Roxbury. Then the eight judges test the teens' fitness by having them do an exhaustive series of jumping jacks, crunches, and scissors. They instruct the auditioners to turn toward the floor, plant their hands on the ground, and alternately jump their right and left legs forward for several minutes. As some begin to stop, tire, or groan, Musau Dibinga, managing director of OrigiNation, tells them this is the reality of a dancer's life.

"People think that it's easy," she says. "It's not. You've got to be fit."

NIA -- the name means "purpose" in the African language of Kiswahili -- is the professional arm of the four dance groups operated by OrigiNation, a nonprofit organization started in 1994 by Dibinga's sister Shaumba-Yandje Dibinga, who is now its executive director. A third Dibinga sister, Muadi, works as OrigiNation's development director. The center began as a cultural summer camp for kids living in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

"There weren't a lot of places young people could go to learn about the arts, learn about themselves, and boost their self-confidence," says Shaumba-Yandje.

Among those campers were about five girls who became NIA's inaugural members. The group now has grown to about 20 people, who as a group have performed at events such as the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston and the recent Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at the Opera House.

"I call them the Alvin Ailey of New England," says Charles Clemons, president of the New England Urban Music Awards, who has invited NIA to open his show for the last two years. "You can see that there's definitely passion, love, and service that drives them."

In March, the group visited New York to appear on BET's video countdown show "106 & Park" for its Wild-Out Wednesday segment, in which competing teens showcase their singing, dancing, or other artistic abilities. NIA made an attitude-filled appearance for a hip-hop dance competition dressed rock 'n' roll style in jeans and faux-hawks. The dance-off between two teams ended with NIA members triumphantly lifting signs that read "KO." They won with 53 percent of the vote.

"They were just very organized and creative," says Pat Charles , a senior writer for the BET show, who selected NIA to compete after viewing their video in December. "Even when they battled, they had, like, signs with them. That's showmanship right there."

NIA put fear into the hearts of subsequent dance competitors. Charles says members of a group from Memphis that won a competition weeks after NIA's appearance, told him, "I'm glad you didn't put us on with that team from Boston." That meeting will happen in August, when winners of this season's Wild-Out Wednesdays return for a showdown.

The performance on the national cable show helped NIA gain a higher profile locally. Christlie Calixte , 17, a Dorchester resident, says one of the reasons she decided to audition for NIA was the BET appearance. But Shaumba-Yandje's vision for NIA is bigger than dance competitions.

"I'm trying to have them do really, really big things," she says, "and set themselves up . . . to reach for the stars more and just be involved in things that are in a different arena."

She dreams big, she says, because she thinks a lot of young people of color live with low expectations. "Some young people just think that there's no place for them to grow. . . . They should always be climbing to reach the top of that ladder."

A day after the auditions, 10 dancers meet for NIA's rehearsals, which occur twice a week. Some members are in college and can't participate in the heavy rehearsal and performance schedule. NIA can have as many as 10 appearances a month, says Shaumba-Yandje.

After a 55-minute warm-up, the group fine-tune s routines for Saturday performances dancing jazz and swing at Wellesley College and hip-hop as an opening act for the Beantown Bounce dance competition. If the auditions on Sunday were tough, the practice today appears a bit more lackadaisical, punctuated by the dancers' laughter as they enjoy each other ' s company.

They do a full run - through of a four-minute hip-hop routine to snippets of songs such as "Yummy " by Gwen Stefani and "Whuteva " by Remy Ma . The dancers powerfully roll on the floor, jump up from the ground , and jerk their arms in clean lines to the music. But when it comes to lifts in the air or slides between another dancer's legs, some merely feign the movements.

Toward the end of the rehearsal, Shaumba -Yandje lets them know their half-heartedness is unacceptable. In a strong, no-nonsense voice, she tells them to completely learn the routines by the time they meet again Wednesday.

The dancers aren't worried. To prepare for that rehearsal , Ashley Vassall , an 18-year-old Dorchester resident who became a member of NIA about three years ago, says, "We'll come in to learn it the day before."

The students' backgrounds are deep and go beyond hip-hop. Tyrone Perry , 20, who lives in Dorchester, has danced hip-hop, modern, ballet, jazz , and tap since the sixth grade. When Belen Estrada , 19, from Roxbury, first auditioned for NIA three years ago, she had been dancing at the Boston Arts Academy for three years studying ballet, modern, jazz , and tap. During the rehearsal, she stands in the front row of the class. Also planted there is Robert Clemons , a 23-year-old Dorchester resident and the first male to audition for NIA eight years ago.

The audition process has changed much since then. Clemons had no music to dance to , and the female members, he says, "actually got to do the judgments and that was really hard. It was really embarrassing. I was only 15 , and I could not dance for my life."

Now it takes three auditions to become a full member of NIA. The atmosphere is tense. Troi Jackson-Conn , 13, an eight-year veteran of the OrigiNation's dance troupe for girls called Girlz of IMANI ("faith" in Kiswahili), buries her face in her hands during a brief break in the Sunday auditions and anxiously groans, "Oh my God." She, along with nine others, ultimately make s the cut and go es on a three-month probation.

After becoming member s , dancers must hand their report cards not only to their parents or guardians but also to Shaumba-Yandje Dibinga. Good grades, even for the college level students, are required to continue in the group. Dibinga also makes sure her dancers receive emotional support. Upon becoming a member, each gets a NIA mentor with whom he or she can discuss personal issues, such as self-esteem or how do deal with parents, friends , and teachers. If the mentor can't help, the troupe member is put in touch with Dibinga.

"I'll talk to them for two hours," says Dibinga. "They have amazing voices -- sometimes they just need someone to listen to them." ■

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