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It's Ballroom Dancing, Preteen Style

By SUSAN SAULNY, Metropolitan Desk

The ballroom dance competition began as any dance competition might, with the introduction of contestants and a quick prance around the stage for the many couples who hoped to outstep everyone else and take home the first-place prize.

And so in silky shirts and flowing skirts and freshly shined dancing shoes, they each took a turn, warming up for the rumba, tango, fox trot, merengue and swing. Partners alternately bowed and curtsied, then waved to their friends and giggled and squirmed. And at this very moment, just minutes into the show, most similarities to an ordinary ballroom dance competition ended.



Photographs by Philip Greenberg for The New York Times
Children from New York City elementary schools competed last evening in a ballroom dancing competition at the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan.

"Settle down, boys and girls!" the master of ceremonies commanded. "Escort your partners off the stage -- and no running!"

But if this was not the stoic and cut-throat dance competition of public television specials, it surely was something else: "adorable." That's how Arte Phillips, a choreographer and former Broadway performer described the "Colors of the Rainbow Team Match," a competition for ballroom dancers from New York City public elementary schools held yesterday evening in the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center.

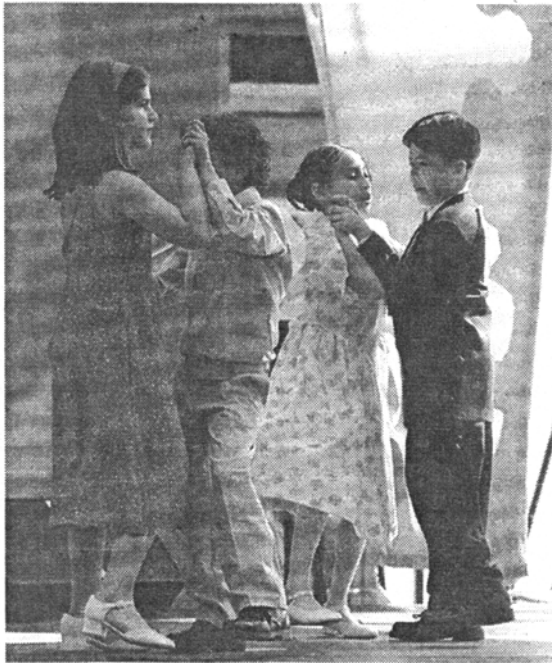
Mr. Phillips was one of the judges watching the little dancers, who were mostly 11 and 12 years old. Some of them had never been on such a big stage in front of such a big crowd before.

But the verve with which they danced never would have betrayed that.

Ryan Davis said he was a little bit nervous -- he had a bevy of family in the audience -- but he also had the composure of a professional. He flung his leg back during the tango at just the right moment with a dramatic, explosive burst of energy, and during his second dance, his hips seemed to sway naturally to the rumba rhythm. And the boy could swing.

"I want to win," he said, explaining that he was introduced to these moves only this semester but took the lessons seriously. "It's very different from what you do in the street. I think the moves are mad fun and way cool."

(For the record, "mad fun" and "way cool" are among the highest of compliments in the lexicon of sixth-grade speak.)



Four of the junior-size dancers warmed up just before going on stage to compete last night.

Ryan and about 3,500 other elementary school students in city schools were introduced to the ballroom moves through **Dancing Classrooms**, an outreach program that the artistic directors of the Theater Company established in 1994. Organizers said 37 schools had participated in 10-week programs, and yesterday, the best of them all met for one last twirl.

"I feel that dancing to express your feelings just makes you happy," said Billy You, 10, a student at Public School 1 in Chinatown. "The movements, the hip shaking, it just feels great."

Nine public schools sent 10 students each to the competition. And given the screams at any mention of the tango, it was clear which dance was the children's favorite. Couples were hand-in-hand and cheek-to-cheek before "Tango d'Amour" even began to play. But it wasn't always that easy to get boys and girls together, **Pierre Dulaine**, the theater's director, explained.

"The first class is very difficult because they don't want to touch," he said. "So we start with the merengue."

Mr. Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau, former partners on Broadway, helped develop **Dancing Classrooms** "in an effort to give something back and show how dance touched our lives," Ms. Marceau said.

Mr. Dulaine added: "These are transferable skills. They might not remember the steps, but they become less shy, they communicate, it helps their posture."

The students from P. S. 11 in Chelsea went home with the top prize last night, but no one left with a sad face.

"Dancing just makes you happy," said Billy, whose team won a prize. "I feel great. Try it out; maybe you would like it, too."