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BUENA PARK SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS FIND THEIR FOOTING AT SEGERSTROM ARTS TEACH DANCE WORKSHOP

Third graders at Gilbert Elementary School discover that with Ballet Folklórico, stomping is only the beginning of the fun

Buena Park, CA — “Can anyone tell me what *zapateado* means?” asks Samantha Zendejas of the Pacifico Dance Company as she strolls among the third graders sitting criss-cross on the floor of the Gilbert Elementary School auditorium. “Something with shoes?” ventures a girl in the front row. “That’s right,” answers Zendejas, pausing to demonstrate with a series of complex, syncopated stomps on the floor with her red stage heels. “It’s a combination of steps where you stomp on the ground to the music. We use *zapateado* in Ballet Folklórico.”

Zendejas is one of 60 professional artists in *Segerstrom Arts Teach* who specialize in dance, music, theater, and visual arts and bring this experience directly to schools. Her workshops highlight different styles of Folklórico dance from different parts of Mexico; all of the styles incorporate traditional Mexican dress and folk music, but they vary by region. Today, she is teaching the students about Folklórico from Guerrero, a state along Mexico’s Pacific coast with a hot, tropical climate. Reflecting the heat of this region, this style of Folklórico is usually performed on a wooden box to better showcase the footwork and syncopated rhythms of the choreography. The dancers of Guerrero also use handkerchiefs as part of their non-verbal communication, because as Zendejas explains, “Dancers can’t talk!” The handkerchiefs help the dancers communicate where they’re going to their partners.

At first, some students seem reluctant to embrace this loud, vibrant style of dance and fully commit to the stomps. Perhaps they are hesitant to make errors in such a noisy fashion. But by the end of 45 minutes, even Edgar, the boy in back who steps quietly and keeps his head down, has warmed up his feet and found his self-confidence. As the students perform the final song, he is stomping with joyful abandon to the sounds of the guitar and trumpet. “My feet can’t stop moving!” he laughs.

Zendejas is not surprised by Edgar’s transformation. “Folklórico is all about releasing the inhibitions that we have learned over a lifetime and discovering the

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thrill of truly letting go,” she explains. “It’s a way of communicating your own strength and spirit, particularly if you are not comfortable making those statements with words.” Katie Nguyen, a representative from Segerstrom who is sitting in on the class, adds: “It’s like a special kind of therapy – like stomp therapy. Many students in this class identify with the Mexican culture and are familiar with Folklorico, but they are only just discovering how truly cathartic it can be.”

When the bell rings, these third graders dance their way to lunch, and Zendejas prepares for the next group, who will soon learn the joys of letting their stomps be heard.

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