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JOHN STONEY/The Chronicle

George Washington High School dancers rehearse their portion of the Vision modern dance series.

### THE ARTS

## 'Vision' Inspires Teen Dancers

By Torri Minton  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Donnette Heath touched her heart, flailed her arms, stumbled. Then, as if something invisible had slammed into her body, she jerked, flew and fell to the floor.

When she performed this dance for her master's thesis at Sam Houston State University in Texas, a man in the audience cried.

"I don't want to use such a big word — 'epiphany' — but it helped him see a part of himself," Heath says. "It made him feel something."

The dance, pulled from Heath's gut, was about the most traumatic and important times in her life, and about hope.

It is that kind of intimate communication that Heath, executive/artistic director of Dance Repertory/San Francisco, wants to encourage in young modern dancers and their audiences through her Vision Series.

In its third year, the series brings together high school dancers, dance teachers and emerging choreographers from around the Bay Area to produce three programs at Fort Mason starting tomorrow.

The "education outreach performance festival" is presented in partnership with Dance magazine and partly supported by the Fort Mason Foundation, patrons, volunteers and Dance Repertory/San Francisco's board of advisers.

The program is meant to both educate



SWIRLING THROUGH THE MOTIONS: Christine Samael practices a piece that will be part of the Vision performance.

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ucate and give exposure to the artists, and to introduce audiences to a commonly misunderstood art form.

"I say the words 'modern dance' and people say 'Oh, I don't like that.' But they don't even know what they like or not," says Heath, gesturing like a ballerina in her small Piedmont apartment. "If they can connect with something before they leave the concert, then they're going to walk away remembering modern dance."

Among the 275 Vision performers this year (up from 60 the first year) are dancers from 12 high schools, from Redwood City to Ross to San Francisco to Berkeley. They have choreographed dances that depict aspects of their lives: a love triangle, urban rituals, racism, helicopter sounds.

At George Washington High School in San Francisco, 13 advanced dance students rehearse in a scuffed portable at the edge of campus. Three students, two girls and a boy, have choreographed a piece about relationships for the Feb. 10 Vision program.

The advanced dancers are doing splits and arabesques and stretching on the floor and using the phone and asking what kind of shoes they're going to wear in the show.

"You guys, if you're chewing gum, spit it out please," says the dance teacher, Nina Mayer.

Tracy Lopez, 17, says playing a character in dance helps her to expand her personality.

"I could be in school, shy, into my studies, but on stage I can be experimenting with my character, being something I'm not normally," she said. "Sometimes the character I play on stage leaks into my own life."

"Tom in 'Two,' which Lopez helped choreograph, is about a love triangle. A girl and her friend like the same guy and are torn apart and then realize the importance of friendship. "If I ever have a situation like that, I'll think of this dance," says Tracy.

OK, but try being a gargoyle. That is 17-year-old Chelsea Cheung's character in the dance.

"I have to be really serious," she said, reaching for her foot. "That's really hard for me because I always stifle."

Then the choreographer who is working with the high school for the Vision Series shows up. A veteran of at least 20 years in the dance world, Deborah Slater of Deborah Slater Dance Theater in San Francisco has arrived to help the students create their work.

"OK, sharp person, is that thing you're doing supposed to be smooth or sharp?" Slater asks a dancer who is representing the aggressive role, the boy, in the



Photo by JOHN STONEY

EYES ON THE SKY: Students from Washington High School rehearse a dance that depicts aspects of their lives.

love triangle.

Slater makes the dancers repeat the whole routine.

"I'm going to ask you to do something that is going to create a little havoc," she says. "Facing that way. Away from the mirror."

The dancers turn to the wall, where they can't see what they are doing. They are confused.

"When you go into the theater the first time you do the piece, it will completely fall apart," Slater says. "That is normal."

The dancers go through the four-minute routine again. And again.

Heath remembers what it was like to rehearse like this, but without the support of a professional choreographer and without a community that encouraged modern dance.

Modern dance wasn't exactly a popular art form in Huntsville, Texas, where she went to high school.

"I tried out for the high school dance drill team, four times — and I didn't make it," she says, shuddering. "That stage of my life was really difficult. The feelings of inadequacy and wanting to be better."

Modern dance, Heath says, helped her find her identity. That is the kind of transformation she



MOOD THROUGH MOVEMENT: Washington's Deena Handa concentrates on her

wants to give to high school dancers, through searching for moves to express their feelings, to watching dancers from other schools, to performing in Fort Mason's pro-

fessional Cowell Theater. "It might help them discover something new about themselves, and accept who they are," Heath says. "I want the kids to walk away

feeling taller than State Building."

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