

Camden, Maine VillageSoup

Jimena Lasansky: heartwork

By Shanna McNair

LINCOLNVILLE (April 8, 2004): If you know with your heart that your parents love you, you can survive anything; that sacred bond will bring you back to life again and again. Surely it is the same for the children of Jimena Lasansky's art classes--they are shown the process of art, and given a foundation deep within that binds them to creativity forever. So it is no surprise that along the Midcoast, "Jimena" is said to be a household word among parents, who must sign up their children quickly for classes at Lasansky School of Dance on 11 Steel Road in Lincolnville or be relegated to the long waiting list. Lasansky is from a "family of artists," has taught nationally and internationally, and has received numerous grants and fellowships, including ones from the Maine Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. She teaches classical ballet, point, modern dance and choreography from the fall through the spring. In the summer, she has an interdisciplinary class that explores all manner of media. The central theme in this class is that the art process should know no disciplinary boundaries, which means that ideas will be playfully and organically manifested, not missing the breadth of artistic possibility from poetry to sculpture. In all of the cross-pollinating of disciplines seen in today's modern art world, this manner of teaching is a standout--because it literally demonstrates that these artistic "boundaries" are just differences in making, not approach. Lasansky's lyrical interdisciplinary classes work through ideas on themes she finds lend themselves naturally to this mode of thinking. She comes up with the theme, a simple word like "echoes," "gathering," "windows" or "edges." This year's concert, on March 17, will feature her two most recent, "layering" and "steps." The five W's (who, what, when, where, why) are any teacher's mainstay, as Lasansky said: "They don't ever get to just say, 'that's really cool.' They have to explain why." But Lasansky goes further, giving children the chance to actualize their ideas in this experiential sense. "My function in what we do is to ask questions; not necessarily to get an answer, but so that the children understand that it's in asking the question that you begin exploring and paying attention to details--and having an opinion," she said. "It's not so much about trusting me, but about trusting themselves, believing they can do it." When a child says, "but I don't know what to write or what to draw," she tells them to put the Cray-Pas or pencil in their hand and trust the Cray-Pas or pencil. "The Cray-Pas knows," she tells the child. First, the class forms a group poem. From there, they explore those themes in dance and then create the sounds to go along with

the dance. Then the class goes into painting and sculpture, all the while building on the same ideas. "They are always amazed by how different everybody's work is," said Lasansky. In the end, she weaves all of their moves together into a seamless choreography. "I take one child's move and put it in front of another, turn it upside down, twist it, repeat it three times," she said. "They watch this process totally live, without music. They see that their dance needs to survive on its own, have its own heartbeat." After this class is over, Lasansky relishes the time she spends alone reading the children's poems over a handful of mornings with her mugful of Yerba Mate in the "hug room." Charmingly enough, the windowy addition was so named by a young student who, upon entering the room for the first time, said, "Oh, it's so quiet in here; you can hug." Though the poems reflect the kinds of imagination-sparking questions Lasansky asks, they are remarkably profound and full of the artful magic that either comes from a child or a wise man.

Lasansky reflected on why she's "always worked with children," since she was just 17, a student herself at Julliard in New York. "As we go through school, and confront different life situations, we become tighter, less willing to risk things, less playful--things become right and wrong," she said. "What I'm trying to do is keep fanning that flame higher, that individuality. And I hope, hope, hope it stays with them."