

THE PERFORMING ARTS

In this year's Arts First weekend at Harvard in early May, the College's many performing groups staged an extravaganza of musical, theatrical, and dance performances, in nine different venues simultaneously and with a new group coming on each half-hour in each venue for four hours. Both the quality and the variety of talent was extraordinary. Many of the short performances on this occasion were samples of regular concerts and shows, which occur year-round and in many cases require heavy time commitment for rehearsal and practice.

There were no fewer than five undergraduate orchestras, eleven a cappella singing groups, seventeen dance companies, and 61 theatrical productions at Harvard this year. Almost none of this activity received academic credit. How can this vast expanse of extracurricular artistic performance be sustained?

First, the talent pool in the student body is very large, and students spend time on music and the arts for their intrinsic rewards. Many of our students participated in music or drama before coming to Harvard. Even though few of our students will make careers as professional performers, these interests are so important to them that they will devote countless hours to them while also pursuing unrelated academic interests, and other extracurricular activities as well.

Second, students don't restrict themselves to the activities with which they arrived at Harvard. Open-mindedness and a willingness to learn new things are high values, and talents seem to be mutable. I happen to be the faculty adviser to the Harvard Ballroom Dance Team. This group receives little institutional support except for practice space, and few of its members had danced before coming to Harvard. Yet the team has developed remarkable skill and grace, and regularly succeeds in national competitions. One of the team members was a varsity swimmer when she began at Harvard. Another learned the love of dance from watching his roommate.

Third, students' diverse backgrounds and creative enthusiasm seem to produce an endless variety of new performance groups. At the Dance Festival during Arts First, we had not only the Dance Company, which performed modern dance, and the Ballet Company, which performed a classical repertoire, but the Crimson Dance Team, which "combines athleticism and artistry through a repertoire of jazz, funk, hip-hop, and lyrical styles," and the South Asian Association, which performed "traditional South Asian folk dances from the North Indian (Punjabi) Bhangra and the West Indian Garba and Dandia Raas (Gujarati) traditions."

The proliferation of performance groups in recent years - there are more than twice as many today as there were ten years ago - is the result of several kinds

of gentle support. A major factor in the growth of student artistic organizations has been the work of the Office for the Arts at Harvard and Radcliffe, which encourages creative thinking and artistic expression through a variety of undergraduate programs; the Arts First weekend is produced by the Office's Director, Myra Mayman. The Harvard Foundation, which under the leadership of Dr. S. Allen Counter has for fifteen years worked to improve cultural and racial understanding within the Harvard community, each February sponsors a major festival called "Cultural Rhythms," which showcases performances by groups representing many ethnic and national cultures. Moreover, the structure of undergraduate organizations at Harvard encourages innovation and creative energy. Organizations must receive official recognition through the office of the Dean of Students, Archie C. Epps III, in order to operate on campus; but the criteria for recognition are rather straightforward: a constitution expressing adherence to basic principles of nondiscrimination; lists of officers and at least ten members, who must be undergraduates; two faculty advisers; and reasonable evidence of ability to meet financial obligations. Harvard itself does not manage student organizations, though small grants are available to performing groups through several channels, and Harvard does provide professional direction for some groups in the performing arts. Nor does the College set the programmatic agenda for new groups: all these efforts are initiated and managed by students. As such, they also provide vehicles for students to learn entrepreneurship, management, and leadership.

Parents may wish to consider a trip to Cambridge to coincide with Arts First or Cultural Rhythms next year; these showcases of student talent are quite spectacular. But even on an "ordinary" weekend the theatrical, choral, orchestral, and dance performances are well worth attending: they are an integral part of a Harvard education, both for the performers and for the audience.