

# HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

## Jonathan Hollander's Battery Dance Company 38 Years Later

Posted: 08/18/2013 [Jim Luce](#) James Jay Dudley Luce Foundation



I've always considered myself fortunate to meet the people who are doing big things-- positively impacting lives in meaningful ways. Recently I met a kindred spirit, Jonathan Hollander, founder and director of Battery Dance Company. His lower Manhattan-based dance company demonstrates the tremendous public good that the arts can contribute to society. He has done it now for almost four decades. With a budget just under \$1 million, Battery Dance Company organizes the city's longest running dance festival, operates in six public schools per year, manages international programs in 10 to 12 countries, produces at least one new production each year, and operates a low cost studio share program that serves over 300 choreographers. This puts him in the realm of great NYC arts masters such as Susan Wadsworth, Aroon Shivdasani, and Marie-Monique Steckel.



*Battery Dance Company in "Shell Games" choreographed by Jonathan Hollander, 3LD Art + Technology Center, New York, May, 2013. Photo by Darial Sneed.*

Battery Dance Company is perhaps best known for its wonderful performances at New York's premier venues and on the world's major stages. Many around New York City also know Jonathan as the artistic director and organizer of the Downtown Dance Festival, which recently held its 32nd annual event. But many are unaware of Battery Dance Company's involvement in public schools--at a time when school art programs have been slashed or altogether eliminated. For 38 years, the dance company has brilliantly filled the gaps.



*Battery Dance Company Portrait. Photo: Battery Dance Company.*

"Social relevance has always been an important piece of what we do," Jonathan underscored in our conversation. "Not every New York City public school child has access to the arts. It's a matter of chance as to whether he or she lives in a zone where there are arts classes."

Also, few people know about the company's impressive cultural diplomacy program: Dancing to Connect. Battery Dance Company created this initiative to engage youth in creativity and team building through modern dance. Since 2006, the company has implemented the program in 38 countries and plans on expanding to 50 by 2015.



*Jonathan Hollander in 1976, the same year he formed Battery Dance Company. He was a dancer and choreographer at the time. Photo: Ed Robbins.*

Dancing to Connect is an intensive 20-hour program that brings together a diverse group of 100 students, most with little or no dance experience. Under the instruction and guidance of five Battery Dance Company teaching artists, the students learn how to express themselves through dance and create an original choreographed piece that they perform on a big stage.

For some of these students, learning dance can be therapeutic. Jonathan recalled the company's experience in Thailand where some of those students were rescued sex workers who experienced many horrors in their young lives. Having written about such kids in Southeast Asia (story), I was really impressed.



*Dancing to Connect rehearsal, Potsdam, Germany Theme: "Inclusion/Exclusion" Program sponsored by Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung-Brandenburg, Federal Ministry of Education, U.S. Embassy Berlin. Photo: Battery Dance Company.*

The program also builds bridges. For example, Israeli, Palestinian and German teens learned to overcome distrust and work together. Amazing. In Iraq, a Dancing to Connect program was held recently in Erbil, a Kurdish region of the country. The U.S. State Department facilitated the participation of Kurdish, Shia and Sunni students--groups with simmering tensions against each other. Fantastic. At the beginning, there is often friction, but at the end, the students hold each other's hands and lean on each other, he noted to me. "You can't dance with somebody you distrust," Jonathan commented. "It's impossible."



*Aboriginal Taiwanese Dancing to Connect participants with Jonathan Hollander in Taichung, 2008. Photo: Battery Dance Company.*

To measure its success and ultimately improve its program, the dance company tracks the opinions of participants before and after Dancing to Connect workshops. The detailed survey asks the participants to identify "the other" and how he or she feels about them.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has been one of the most challenging locations. "You can't walk anywhere in Kinshasa without being concerned for your safety," Jonathan said. In addition to the dangers, the students live in extreme poverty in shantytowns, and many of the facilities for dance are decrepit. "Yet our program in the DRC is one of the most fulfilling ever," he added. Despite the challenges, students showed up each day, dressed immaculately and ready to practice.



*Dancing to Connect participants in Erbil, Iraq, 2012*

Jonathan Hollander is one of the most accomplished artists I've met. Some of his accolades include a Choreography Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, two Fulbright awards, the Silver Mask of the Silesian Dance Theatre (Poland) and the USable Award (Germany). He has been a guest speaker for the Aspen Institute, India Foundation for the Arts, and keynote speaker for the 2011 Asia-Pacific International Dance Conference. As a philanthropist and writer, I'm always curious about what motivates other people to do big things. I was not surprised to learn from Jonathan that, like me, the fruit didn't fall far from the tree. Both of Jonathan's parents were on the boards of directors of NGOs and nurtured an ethos of giving in the family.



*Dancing to Connect participants with immigrant backgrounds in Offenbach, Germany*

As a 16-year-old high school student, Jonathan lived in India for three months as an exchange student. "That experience jump-started my international outlook," he told me. The Indian family he lived with was a leader in business and arts, yet they lived a humble life and cared a great deal about providing social services for the poor. My start in global thinking came from being a high school exchange student to Germany with AFS.

Reared in the wealthy suburbs of Chevy Chase, Md., he also spent time tutoring inner city schoolchildren in Washington, D.C. He spent the summer following his high school senior year at Junior Village in D.C., which he recalled as "a rundown facility for homeless children." He encountered talented children who, if given the opportunity, would excel in life. Ironically, those children, who had experienced so much, enriched Jonathan's life.



*Dancing to Connect Workshop sponsored by the U.S. Embassy Madrid and Centro de Danza Canal.*

Given all that Jonathan has accomplished, he said achieving sustainability for Battery Dance Company is his major accomplishment. "During the last 38 years we've seen a lot of dance companies come and go," he noted.

Jonathan said, "We glued ourselves to a community at the very beginning." There was a lack of art in lower Manhattan at that time. Downtown workers spent all day crunching numbers or erecting scaffoldings and needed some balance. "That gave us a unique reason for being among the hundreds of other dance companies that already existed in New York. There was a territory that needed us and that gave us a sense of purpose right from the beginning," he added.



*Battery Dance Company founder Jonathan Hollander. Photo by Richard Termine*

As the dance company expands at home and overseas, Jonathan wisely plans to grow by engaging and becoming a part of the communities where his company plants its roots. I encourage you to do whatever you can to support the Battery Dance Company and its founder Jonathan Hollander. The company is unrivaled in its scope, its vital mission dedicated to using the arts to bridge differences around the world, and its founder a true thought leader and global citizen.

*Edited by Nigel Roberts of The Stewardship Report.*

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