

## ART WORKS BLOG

### Art Talk with Battery Dance Company

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by Liz Auclair



Dancing to Connect teaching artists work with students in Madrid, Spain. Photo courtesy of Battery Dance Company

#### "Our mantra is 'artistic excellence, social relevance.'" -- Jonathan Hollander

"Completely unpredictable and uniformly fabulous"—that's how Jonathan Hollander describes the results of [Battery Dance Company](#)'s Dancing to Connect program. In more than 50 countries, Dancing to Connect has taught young people, most of whom have no previous dance training, how to use movement to express themselves. In just a week, Dancing to Connect teaching artists work with the students to create and perform a dance piece devised entirely from their own creativity. Recently, as part of a Mission Continues Fellowship, Roman Baca—a dancer, choreographer, and former U.S. Marine—collaborated with Battery Dance to bring Dancing to Continue to Iraq. (You can read more about Baca's experience in our new edition of [NEA Arts](#).)

To learn more about Dancing to Connect and Battery Dance Company's cultural diplomacy efforts we spoke with Hollander, who founded Battery Dance Company in 1976 and leads the organization as artistic and executive director.

#### NEA: Can you tell me a bit about what inspired you to create Battery Dance Company?

JONATHAN HOLLANDER: Like many other sort of ambitious young people who are drawn to the art of dance, I had been dancing in a company with a variety of choreographers in New York City and I realized that my passion was for choreography. I had been in a company for three years that was a collective and I had the opportunity to "try my wings" in choreography without going through the huge undertaking of starting an institution. But that collective sort of came apart at the seams; everyone went in different directions, and I realized that I wanted to continue with pursuing my craft as a choreographer. The only way to do that—that I could see at that point—was to create a company.

One of the critical factors that determined the path was that my partner, who was my wife-to-be, and I moved into a loft in the Wall Street area. At that time, New York was in a severe recession and old buildings in areas like the financial district were sort of leftover. Nobody wanted them. Soho was already over-populated with artists and had become expensive. But we found 3,000 square feet in a building on Stone Street, the first paved street in Manhattan. It was a historic district surrounded by office towers, but this low-rise, five-story building had wooden floors and exposures on four sides. It was the perfect laboratory for a dance company to take shape. And the fact that we were in an area of banking and insurance companies and law firms where there was really very little art was, I think, a key determining factor in what Battery Dance Company eventually became.

**NEA: What is unique about the work of Battery Dance Company?**

HOLLANDER: Our mantra is "artistic excellence, social relevance." Those two parts of the puzzle are equal in terms of what our mission is. We want to make the arts accessible to all. In no way do we want to compromise the quality of the arts. We feel like all people deserve great art and you don't know where you're going to find a wonderful audience, a great student, or a budding dancer/choreographer. You can't assume that these people know where to go to nourish their latent talent or passion. So being in an area like the financial district where there was not a single theater challenged us to figure out how [to] get our art to the people. We began performing out of doors on corporate plazas and parks and piers and attracting really large audiences—much, much larger audiences than we would have if we were in even a name-brand, small, black box theater in New York City. So we realized we can own this process—we don't have to have anyone tell us we can do it. And I think that's a huge key to who we are and what we became. We've made our own path. We haven't accepted definitions of what a dance company can do. So you might find Battery Dance Company in a park, you might find Battery Dance Company in a public school, you might find Battery Dance Company at a main-street marquee theater, you might find Battery Dance Company in a small village in India. The variety of what we've been able to do has taken us to 54 countries around the world and to untold amounts of alternative spaces in New York. That's what makes our life interesting; that's what refreshes us constantly.

**NEA: How did the idea for Dancing to Connect come about?**

HOLLANDER: We've worked in the New York City public schools for over three decades. In addition to creating new work and pushing ourselves as artists, it's been very important to us to nourish these relationships with young people in schools that don't necessarily have access to the art. This propelled us to create a whole new vehicle for arts education called Dancing to Connect.

We found that wherever we go with this program the results are completely unpredictable and uniformly fabulous. It's a program that was developed through our learning step-by-step about what works and what doesn't work with high schools students, in terms of dance. What we found was, the longer the program, the less effective it was. We're not talking about a dance conservatory program, we're talking about a program that appeals to and can work with any group of participants, whether or not they've had any dance training before. That's perhaps what's so surprising or different. Obviously, we're not going to remake dance training and say it can be done in an instant—you drop it into water and it flowers. No, no, no. But what we've figured out is that the art of choreography is something that very few people actually explore. Whereas visual arts, music, even theater, these are [art] forms that—as part of many young people's educations—they get an exposure to it, they're given the materials to work with [that discipline]. But they're not given the materials to work with dance and choreography. So when we make those materials available, young people just grab onto it and make it their own. And that's what this program is about. We do not bring in pre-fabricated choreography. We bring in our love for the art form, our understanding of the craft involved in building a piece of choreography. We hand over those tools to young people and in the course of 20 or 30 hours they make their own choreography. They stun us with the results.

**NEA: Can you describe what happens in the program?**

HOLLANDER: We have teaching artists, who are the same people who are our dancers and choreographers. That's the key to the Dancing to Connect profile—we find people who are multi-talented, who are world-class performers, budding, emerging choreographers with lots to say, and nurturing teachers. We know that each and every person in our group is capable of handling the challenges. [They have] the adaptability to channel their creativity and at the same time to unleash the creativity of the young people they're working with. And when I say "young people," that can be anybody from age 14 to young adults.

[We have] one or two teaching artists, depending on the number of participants, work with the group of participants. We do five successive days, four to five hours a day, whatever we're able to negotiate, and during that process, our teaching artists go through a series of exercises. They give challenges and assignments and essays to the participants that lead them from the cerebral thought process into the physical realm. They create a pathway whereby the participants, who may never have been in a dance class before, are all of a sudden up off the floor, and using their body in creative ways, with shape, with movement, with dynamics, with levels, with speed, all of the different concepts of movement come into these little assignments.

[For instance,] you write your name in the air with any part of your body that you choose other than your finger. If you didn't hear the instruction and you were watching the room, [you'd see that] all of a sudden people went from static to kinetic as they're creating these amazing movement phrases. Then the next thing that they have to understand is, "Okay, that was fabulous, can you do it again?" How do you memorize a sequence of movements if you've never done that before? And then, "We'd like you two to come together and teach each other the phrase that you made up." All of a sudden you're the leader now and you need to teach this other person your phrase. There's this team-building aspect, sharing, building up leadership—all kinds of side results from this dance process. At the end of it there's a performance, oftentimes in a big theater, and some of these students have actually never been in the theater before. They've never been on stage. They've never even been in the part of the city where the theater is. There's a whole multi-dimensional awakening that happens through this process.

**NEA: Why did you decide to use Dancing to Connect as a program to reach students internationally?**

HOLLANDER: It couldn't have existed without the three decades of background of work in the schools in New York. But the very first program was in Germany, the second was in Cambodia, and the third was in New York. There's an element of chance here. You don't necessarily make every opportunity that you have. You have to be ready for the opportunities but you don't know when they're going to come about. And the program in Germany came about through a lot of different coincidences and involved a lot of different people—Germans, Americans, my dance company, another dance company that was collaborating with us, and the local community in which we found ourselves—Freiburg, Germany. It's a very musical city and the schools in Freiburg basically invited us and gave us the opportunity to work with their students around a historical theme. There's an intellectual component to the Dancing to Connect program [that] provokes the creative process. That theme is something that we determined in the first instance but then in every instance after that it's been shaped and formed by the participants themselves through discussions, through sharing between the teaching artists and the participants.

One of the students that we worked with in Kenya, in Nairobi, said that Carmen, who was our teaching artist, "helped us share our secrets." I think that was the pivotal experience in creating whatever the work was that was created there. Opening up the vulnerability of the young people, making them feel like it's a safe environment. There's no right and wrong. You've just got to experiment, the way you do if somebody puts some paper and paints in front of you and says go to it, let your mind go, don't criticize yourself, don't manage every single stroke of the brush, just let it go. And that's kind of what we do.

**NEA: You have collaborated with the State Department and U.S. embassies on cultural diplomacy programming. What is it about the arts, and dance in particular, that makes it such a successful tool for this kind of outreach?**

HOLLANDER: So many reasons. If the audience is young people, and the State Department is very concerned about the next generation, what country in the world

has young people who don't like to dance? Now, have they ever done modern dance? Have they ever choreographed a dance? Probably not. But we don't tell them, "You can't move this way." We let them move the way they move. That's another part of the secret ingredient—we're not telling them to imitate us. Because that you could not do in a week. Instead we say, "We think you have it within you and you just haven't found it yet so we're going to help you see if you can find it." "It" being your own self-expression through movement. Language is less important.

Theater couldn't do this because theater relies on language and words and we're working in countries like Japan where people study English from a very early age and they can write it and read it beautifully but they can't speak it... The University of Freiburg did a study of our program in terms of English-language learning and they found that students were speaking much better English in the dance workshops than they were in their English classes because the motivation was so great. Which also speaks to the motivation of young people to dance.

We have been very fortunate to work with the State Department, to work with U.S. embassies around the world. I was a Fulbright lecturer in India in 1992 and an American Field Service Exchange Student in high school so the cross-cultural experience of living in different places, adapting to different cultures, and sharing with people in very different circumstances has been something natural to me, and I've bred that culture in Battery Dance Company. One of things that I think allowed us to be successful in working with embassies is because what we want to do is in keeping with their mission and goals. They want to reach the next generation. They want to reach populations that are unexposed to American culture and may not have the opportunity to engage in the arts in a formalized way.

**NEA: Can you describe a Dancing to Connect experience that really sticks out in your mind?**

HOLLANDER: I'll tell you a New York City one. We were in a very large public high school—thousands of students. It was in a very difficult neighborhood with kids facing all kind of challenges. We tend to forget about the challenges that they're dealing with because we get so immersed in the project that it's all about getting from here to there—there's going to be a performance, it's on Friday, and we have five hours left to really refine and polish and get this ready. At one of the rehearsals leading up to that performance, two sisters who had been really important in the piece and who were doing so beautifully were not there. I went to the teacher and said, "I just can't tell you how disappointed I am. They were doing so well and look at this—they're not here." And she [explained that] their mother was taken by the police for drug possession. The sisters were remanded to Covenant House, which is sort of a safe harbor for young people. They had spent the day trying to get out of Covenant House so they could come to rehearsal. And they somehow got through the bureaucracy, got themselves out of there and into school the next day so they could perform.

A similar kind of story happened in Germany in Freiburg. We were halfway through this wonderful experience of building dance pieces and one of the students came to the school teacher and said that his father had won a prize and the whole family was given a trip to South Africa and they were leaving on Saturday, the day of the performance. And he just did not know what to do. His teacher told him, "This is an incredible thing. I'm sure that Battery Dance will understand." Of course we did and we started making adjustments in the piece since he would not be there. Well, the next day he showed up and he said he told his parents that he could go to South Africa any time but this was the only time that he could do this dance piece. He was going to stay back and stay with his grandmother while his family was away. This same young man—who was not a dancer, this is not somebody who was going to become Baryshnikov, he was a soccer-playing, regular guy—he and his cohort convinced us we had to go back to his school next year to have a program for the veterans so they could go farther with this project. The third year that we were in Freiburg, those veterans, including this young man, wanted to be teacher-trainees and help us with the younger groups. That probably gives you a sense of the incredible sense of belonging to something that happens in this program.

**NEA: How does Dancing to Connect fit in with Battery Dance Company's other international programming?**

HOLLANDER: Wherever we go, we also perform. We are taking our art around the world. But these days the Dancing to Connect vehicle is leading us into all these new areas of exploration. For example, dance as a vehicle for conflict resolution. We worked with Israeli, Palestinian, and German youth in a two-phased program and we tracked the results. The inclination toward war as a vehicle for settling conflict changed by about 30 percent in terms of the young people who took part. The perception of the other—Palestinian perception of Israelis—changed over the course of this program. We're now at that very exciting stage in our development where we're realizing that this model arts education program also has ramifications for social change in ways that we never imagined—working with HIV-positive populations, countering stigma, countering ignorance. The fact that an American dance company would go to an African country and work with HIV-positive people—in a country where if you're sick, the family throws you out onto the street. And yet, that's our chosen community. That telegraphs something in terms of public health, in terms of information, and we're very dedicated to exploring more and more avenues for using this vehicle to teach and promote health and social practice of inclusion.

**NEA: What do you see as the role of the artist in the community?**

HOLLANDER: I guess everything that I've said addresses that. An artist cannot work without community in my opinion. I'm not interested in insularity. The older I get and the more engaged I am in my art form and in nurturing the next generation, it's for me opening doors, not keeping it quiet and secluded and removed from community.

**NEA: Conversely, what do you think is the responsibility of the community to the artist?**

HOLLANDER: That's an interesting question and I don't know that I have a really quick and easy answer for that because, in an idealistic view of our society, I wish that the arts were more understood and appreciated as a foundation for life, not peripheral to life. It's very hard for an artist to penetrate a community that is convinced that the arts are unnecessary or not for me, for someone else. And yet, I don't feel like I face that with my art. I feel like I face that with funding. Artists are struggling to grow their art and, let's face it, it's very expensive. Dance is an expensive art form, not only in terms of money but in terms of logistics and facilities. Like right now we are negotiating with the U.S. Embassy in South Africa. And on the one hand they want to reach the same audience that we're interested in, which is the disadvantaged, non-elite audiences. On the other hand, they want us to go to those audiences and work in those communities where there are no appropriate facilities. So we're up against a really difficult conundrum of the fact that we want to say to a community we go into, "It's actually not healthy for young people to be jumping on cement." On the other hand, we don't want to be putting forth the message that you need to be rich and have expensive facilities in order to dance. So we're kind of up against it. It's the resources I guess I'm addressing in terms of the community responsibility to the artist. If the community wants art it has to understand the resources necessary for art to thrive.

**NEA: At the NEA, we believe that Art Works. What does this phrase mean to you?**

HOLLANDER: It's obviously a double meaning because "artworks" are pieces of art and "Art Works" [means] that art functions and if you pair that with "A Great Nation Deserved Great Art" theme, then it means that art works as part of the mechanism of society.

*If you're in New York this August Battery Dance Company will be presenting the 31st annual Downtown Dance Festival through August 17. More information about this free event can be found at [www.batterydance.org](http://www.batterydance.org) .*

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