

## Artists as Ambassadors of Cultural Diplomacy

May 6, 2014 - 1:43pm | admin



**By Jonathan Hollander**

In 2009, a gathering was held at what was then the White Oak Plantation, philanthropist Howard Gilman's haven for the arts and exotic fauna. Those invited were activists in a world almost as diverse as the animals that Gilman had lovingly harbored. Practitioners, advocates, and officials who espoused the notion that art is critical in the realm of international diplomacy all mingled together.

It was a watershed moment, a coming-out party of sorts for the Battery Dance Company—a premier dance company committed to using dance as a method of cultural diplomacy. We had been working internationally for the previous 17 years, with projects stretching across North Africa and the Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic and Nordic Countries, as well as South and East Asia.

But other than a profile in [The New York Times by Erika Kinetz](#), and references in the *Wall Street Journal* and the now-defunct *New York Sun*, New York arts power brokers were largely unaware of our global footprint. The story of Battery Dance Company reveals how the art of dance can bring together people from across the globe, even in the extreme circumstances of corruption, human trafficking, and ethnic conflict.

Among those who paid special attention were the creative entrepreneurs, Rita J. King and Joshua Fouts, and the legendary Margaret C. Ayers, torchbearer of international cultural engagement. This trio of visionaries joined with me in gestating the concept that has become the first online Cultural Diplomacy Toolkit, that was ultimately funded in its entirety by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation.

The White Oak gathering, with Ayers, former NEA Chair Frank Hodsoll, Ambassador Cynthia Schneider, and scholar Joni Cherbo at its helm, was expected to be a progressive step forward in the field of cultural diplomacy. The aim of the gathering was to build an online database embedded with an updatable encyclopedia of information on international projects, resources, facilities, funding, and projects. However, the cost proved too high at a time when foundations were hunkering down with decimated endowments and unprecedented instability across the arts sector. Instead, a more modest approach such as Battery Dance Company's online toolkit had a strong appeal, resisting the notion that arts organizations would never share their trade secrets.



*Local dancers on stage in Kinshasa, DRC, wearing Battery Dance Company Dancing to Connect T-shirts and waving certificates.*

**Leap forward:** The Cultural Diplomacy Toolkit is now [live](#), embedded with the stories and details of specific projects that took place in 61 countries. Within the next month, another three projects will be added, each illustrating the intrinsic value of dance in addressing social ills.

- **Belfast:** In a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, 80 students from the Catholic and Protestant communities engaged in Battery Dance Company-led dance workshops for 20 hours, creating four original pieces of choreography, and in the process, learning to work with ‘the other’ across the fractious religious/political divide. Hosting the program was [Youth Action](#), a leading NGO with a 70 year history. Battery Dance Company performed side-by-side with its student mentees at the [Studio Theater at the Waterfront](#).
- **Trappes, France:** In this suburb of Paris, most recently associated with violent protests by its North African immigrant community in conflict with police over the “Burqa Ban,” 50+ community members, youth and

adults, engaged in dance workshops led by Battery Dance Company, culminating in a performance at [La Merise](#). Local partners include the Municipality of Trappes and [Black Blanc Beur](#), a dance company based in Trappes that is celebrating its 35th anniversary. We benefitted from the enthusiastic support of the Deputy Mayor for Culture who managed to entice the Federal Minister of Education to attend the final performance.

- **New Delhi, India:** The epidemics of gender violence and human trafficking were at the center of a conference co-sponsored by [Ananta \(Aspen Institute India\)](#) and [EmancipAction](#) who invited Battery Dance Company to perform and conduct workshops. Battery Dance Company has ventured into this important and complex area of intervention previously in Kinshasa, DRC, and Bangkok. In New Delhi, Battery Dance Company teaching artists trained 40 young women, survivors of human trafficking and other forms of violence while simultaneously sharing their methodology with dance movement therapists from Kolkata, Mumbai, and New Delhi who are part of a network under the auspices of [Kolkata Sanved](#), an NGO celebrating its 10th Anniversary. The opportunity to be in India again after a gap of 8 years allowed Battery Dance Company to launch new programs in Srinagar, Mumbai, Badlapur and Kolkata.

Here are some snapshots from the Toolkit:

### **Azerbaijan: Persistence pays off**

Battery Dance Company's program in Azerbaijan was nearly cancelled when the U.S. Embassy conducted a site visit at the theater and became aware that the stage was in such bad condition that it was not considered fit for barefoot dancing. However, it was too late from our perspective to cancel since airlines tickets were already purchased and Baku was in the middle of the itinerary. Our intrepid production designer came up with a solution that is described in the narrative. It took nerves of steel, but the results were [worth it](#).



*Battery Dance Company Teaching Artists Bafana Matea and Robin Cantrell teaching a master class in Baku, Azerbaijan.*

## Burma (Myanmar): Defying Bans on Public Gatherings

Twenty-four carpenters and electricians (most in flip flops or barefoot) [labored](#) on the basketball court of the American Club here in Yangon. They built a stage and audience risers out of unfinished teak. Why, you might wonder, would all of this effort and expense be necessary? Why couldn't we load into a theater or a hotel ballroom, where the staging and lights would be on hand? The answer is simple: Myanmar, is a police state and its rulers are distrustful of any public gatherings. A theater or hotel would most likely have its performance permission revoked moments before the curtain went up. Thus the basketball court on American-owned property was the only venue that was immune from interruption.



*Battery Dance Company Artistic Director Jonathan Hollander and Translator on stage in Yangon, Myanmar.*

Investment in the field of cultural diplomacy yields measurable rewards. The vast majority of participants in Battery Dance Company's Dancing to Connect programs indicated that they would take part again if the program returned. With the program, the perception of Americans abroad improves dramatically as do participants' self-confidence and optimism about the future. As former U.S. Department of State Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs and current Chairman of the Battery Dance Company Board, Dr. Helena Kane Finn, attests:

"During my years in the diplomatic service, both in Washington and at our embassies in Tel Aviv and Berlin, I was able to observe first-hand the incredible impact made by the Battery Dance Company abroad. Aside from its superb aesthetic mastery of the very American art form of modern dance, the BDC adds an important dimension in the area of social responsibility. Dance communicates values in a dynamic fashion that is not limited to language.

BDC has worked with disadvantaged young people in immigrant communities overseas, as well as with people caught up in intractable conflict. Its programs enable the expression of powerful emotions without words -- truly one of the most important and effective elements in the field of cultural diplomacy."

Through the launch of its Cultural Diplomacy Toolkit and its new Dancing to Connect Institute, Battery Dance Company puts its heart and soul behind the friend-making, peacebuilding endeavors that constitute cultural diplomacy.

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[Cover Photo by Benoit Dorchies. Battery Dance Company on stage in Maubeuge, France, 2013 on a U.S. Department of State Tour]