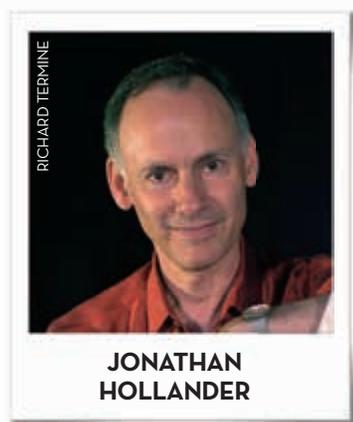


MOVEMENT MATTERS

AFTER SHADOWING **JONATHAN HOLLANDER** AND HIS TEAM AT THE BOMBAY TEEN CHALLENGE AND WITNESSING CHILDREN FACE THEIR TROUBLED YESTERDAYS THROUGH DANCE, SIMONE LOUIS SHARES THE LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE



John Green once said, 'We need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken.' Nothing has convinced me more of this, than the Sunday I spent with the Battery Dance Company and the youth of Bombay Teen Challenge. A sense of elation washes over me as I remember the children's zealous grins and the beautiful spirit of Jonathan Hollander - founder and director of the Manhattan-based dance company.

I travelled with him and his dancers, from Mumbai to the Bombay Teen Challenge (BTC) headquarters, located deep in the outskirts of the city. The non-profit NGO provides homes for women whom they have saved from a life of enslavement in

brothels, shelters for children of these women, a home for AIDS orphans, medical care and rescue for young boys in drug circles. After a three-hour enervating journey in the Mumbai heat, I entered Ashagram (The Village of Hope). Four young girls came running up to smilingly shake my hand and say, "Good morning sister", and with that simple greeting I felt all my fatigue drain away.

The dancers from the Battery Dance Company then took over with each of their teams - two groups of about 20 girls each and one group of 12 boys...all mentored by Jonathan's remarkable choreographers and dancers, Carmen, Mira and Clement, respectively. They had been working together for two days before I arrived,

and today was the culmination of the programme. Each group was putting together the movement and techniques they had discovered, to perform for each other in the evening.

I began the day shadowing Carmen, followed by Clement, both at opposite ends of Ashagram. Mira

begun to really let this stranger in. They didn't even need a translator anymore – the language barrier was irrelevant. There was no choreography, no 'steps'. The mentors had guided them through feelings and examples of situations, to create movements of their very own. When they first saw

with their bodies. A few of them, I was told, had come to the centre just weeks ago, in the worst state that BTC had ever seen. And there they were, letting it all out through dance. The evening sharing was an absolute hit, with stunning performances from each group and from the mentors. Jonathan Hollander spoke



and her group were at BTC's main location, 15 minutes away. As I watched Carmen's group, I was amazed at the creativity of each girl and the connection they had with their mentor. When I spoke to Carmen on the ride there, she had expressed that she wasn't fully satisfied with what they had achieved in the short time and wished she could have helped them open up more. But when I later saw something truly marvellous unravel right in front of me, I knew Carmen was really just a perfectionist. Being a dancer and teacher myself, I know how difficult it is to get children to unwrap their personalities through movement. But these girls, who had been through more than most of us could fathom in our worst nightmares...they had

me watching, I noticed some of them get conscious which translated into smaller, restrained actions. However, as the minutes ticked by, I shared their stories, and the movements became larger, more confident, more trusting. They performed wholeheartedly, not holding back one bit. They let me in. That moment is one I will never forget.

Clement's group of boys was quicker at becoming comfortable with my presence. Even though they were fewer in number than the girls, they were diverse and so dynamic. Some of them moved better than professional dancers that I know!

After a short lunch break, I travelled to where Mira and her group were rehearsing. They moved in unison, carrying each other and making music

beautifully – “This evening has certainly proven how the arts can be an agent of change in someone's life. It has blessed all of us with so much inspiration, to see the wonder of these beautiful souls revealed through movement,” and so did K.K. Devaraj – founder of BTC, father to all the children there and one of the most admirable people I have met.

There are so many stories that I'd love to share, but, I'll leave you with one. Sandip, who is now an amazing photographer and a charming young man, once lived on a single square tile at a Mumbai railway station. He was brought to BTC by Devaraj, and he ran away thrice. Each time, he would change his mind and return to the spot where he had been rescued from – Devaraj would be standing there, waiting for him. After being abandoned by his parents and never really knowing affection, here was a man who just waited for days on end, to hug him and lead him to a better future. Ask Sandip why he stayed the fourth time, and he smiles: “I looked at him waiting for me yet again, and I thought, maybe this is what love looks like.” 