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Skype Connects U.S. Arts Teachers With Iraqi Students

By **PIA CATTON**

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When Adel Qies Adel wants to try out dance steps he learned on YouTube, he waits until a park empties out.

It isn't an ideal place for dance. But then neither is Baghdad.

Mr. Adel is a 22-year-old aspiring dancer in Iraq, where dance studios are few and far between. He does, however, have a teacher: Sean Scantlebury, who



Battery Dance Company, New York City

Dancer Sean Scantlebury has been giving 22-year-old Adel Qies Adel of Baghdad regular dance lessons from Manhattan using Skype.
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instructs him regularly over Skype from a Tribeca studio.

The pair is one of several in which U.S. professional dancers are teaching young Iraqi performing artists who have struggled to further their

educations in their home country. They have found each other through a grass-roots network of artists, nurtured by New York choreographer Jonathan Hollander, founder of the Battery Dance Company.

For Mr. Hollander, being a cultural ambassador of sorts is a role that has evolved from his work bringing arts to regions of conflict.

In 2006, the choreographer launched Dancing to Connect, a weeklong arts workshop that has been held in more than 40 countries, often funded by the State Department or U.S. embassies.

In 2012, Dancing to Connect sent two teachers to Iraq, where they led a program in the Kurdish capital of Erbil.

As word of those teachers spread and the situation in the region worsened, a handful of students found Mr. Hollander through Facebook. After listening to their stories, he offered guidance.

"At first, it was about me. I was counseling and mentoring," he said.



Sean Scantlebury stretches while Skyping with Aadel Qies Aadel in Iraq as Battery Dance Company's Gabriella Cipolla watches.
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This year, Mr. Hollander realized he could provide real help by finding fellow artists who could teach over Skype.

He tapped into his own network, asking a well-connected music couple, the cellist Roberta Cooper and violinist Eugene Drucker, to recommend teachers of violin and piano.

Ms. Cooper said she gave careful thought to the question.

"It had to be someone who had a feeling not just for teaching, but the kind of person who is compassionate," she said. "You're not going to be teaching children of affluence."

Constance Meyer, a violinist who lives in Beverly Hills, Calif., said yes.

Over Skype, Ms. Meyer has led several one-hour lessons with Hardi Mohammad, a 24-year-old living in Erbil. The two have studied etudes and scales, but Ms. Meyer's central goal has been correcting Mr. Mohammad's hand positioning, which was too close to his body.

"If your hand is up against the neck, you look like a waiter," she said. "On his Facebook page, there is a photo of him in a local orchestra. The entire string section looks like that."

"She gave me some technique," Mr. Mohammad said during an interview over Skype, adding he didn't have a regular teacher for three years at his local art institute.

To make do, Mr. Mohammad watched YouTube videos and practiced on his own. He and others also participated in a summer-instruction program run by American Voices, a nonprofit that ran arts camps in Erbil and other Iraqi cities from 2007 until 2013.

For the pianist Hersh Anwer, 24, of Erbil, the visits meant access to trained professionals.

"After they're gone, there is no piano teacher," he said.

American Voices's founder and executive director, John Ferguson, said when he first met Mr. Anwer, there was a teacher who was really more a composer.

"He was teaching them to play 'Flight of the Bumblebee' with the pedal down the whole time," Mr. Ferguson said, rather than the light touch that the virtuosic work calls for.

Even though Mr. Anwer is an accomplished pianist, he sought out Mr. Hollander and now studies online with pianist Diane Walsh, who lives in Maine.

Ms. Walsh declined to comment, saying her students' work is private, but Mr. Anwer said her advice is mainly "about my body, my fingers and the form of how to play. She really likes me when I play Chopin." Mr. Anwer is considering

becoming a teacher himself, he said during a Skype chat, after which he showed off framed pictures in his home, including a poster from his concert.

While musicians can practice in solitude, the situation is harder for an aspiring theater director like Halo Azad, 22, whom Mr. Hollander is mentoring.



Jonathan Hollander, executive director of Battery Dance Company, has helped develop a small group of U.S. arts instructors who teach Iraqi students via Skype.

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artists are often afraid to perform outside university or official settings, which makes Mr. Azad grab at his mop of curly hair. "How can you tell your story if people can't see you?" he asked.

Mr. Adel, who studies law in addition to dance, understands Mr. Azad's craving for an audience, he said. "How can the people outside Iraq know me?"

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Mr. Azad studied theater in Erbil, organized a local theater festival and took his stage adaptation of the book "The Patience Stone" to a festival in Algeria.

In August, he moved to Germany, where his family once lived and where, he said, the artistic constraints are fewer.

In Iraq, theater