Movement as cultural diplomacy at Battery Dance

By Elizabeth Zimmer

After toiling in relative obscurity for decades, Jonathan Hollander is making headlines with his company, Battery Dance, and his international outreach program, Dancing to Connect. Battery Dance Festival (formerly Downtown Dance Festival), a free, multicultural event held in Lower Manhattan since 1982, caught major attention from the New York Times last summer. And the Wall Street Journal took note when a young law student in Baghdad, Iraq, began taking dance lessons via Skype from one of Battery Dance's members.

Hollander, 64, who founded Battery Dance in 1976 and Dancing to Connect in 2006, emphasizes relationship issues in his work in New York City and abroad. He calls his practice "dance diplomacy." Last fall, for example, he traveled with Dancing to Connect to Vietnam, where, over the course of three weeks, he and his troupe led workshops in Hue and Hanoi, performed five times in three cities, offered master classes and outreach activities in colleges, and taught students from schools for the blind and for the deaf.

Dance via Skype

Learning dance technique via Skype isn't ideal, but for Iraqi law student Aadel Qies Aadel, it was the only option. Already a b-boy, Aadel wanted to train in traditional ballet and modern dance, but at the time there were no dance classes in Baghdad. Dancing to Connect had held a workshop in Erbil, Iraq, in 2012; Aadel heard about the program via dancer friends who'd participated. In 2014 he contacted Battery Dance, and company member Sean Scantlebury agreed to teach Aadel via Skype.

The Skype sessions took place in Aadel's family's living room, accompanied by frequent interruptions from relatives and a ringing telephone. Scantlebury found the work frustrating because he couldn't give his
22-year-old student manual corrections, but he persevered, in part because he identified with Aadel, who, like him, had parents who objected to the notion of dancing as a career path for their son.

After several months of the Skype lessons, Hollander and Scantlebury brought Aadel to Amman, Jordan, to train intensively for 10 days in April 2015. Scantlebury and Aadel also performed at the Amman Jazz Festival, building on what they’d done on Skype.

“[Aadel] learned partnering, ensemble dancing, picking up choreography that wasn’t hip-hop, and dancing to live music,” says Hollander. “All these elements were completely new, but we’d forged this close relationship on Skype: we were already deep into loving each other, and trusting.” The Skype classes are no longer needed now that the National Theatre of Iraq in Baghdad has resumed offering dance classes; Aadel takes ballet there.

Global workshops
Those Skype sessions represent only a fragment of Battery Dance’s scope. Based in a loft on Manhattan’s Lower Broadway, the organization does a lot on an annual budget of just under $1 million. Dancing to Connect, supported by the U.S. State Department among other donors, accounts for about 25 percent of total income.

“Our studio-share program is a big part: 300 choreographers, teachers, and community groups use our studios at a subsidized rate,” says Hollander.

Hollander developed his global awareness and love for the arts at a young age: his family’s next-door neighbors in suburban Chevy Chase, Maryland, were from Micronesia, his friends were culturally diverse, and he was an exchange student in India for one year in high school. As a teen he studied piano—but, he says, “I knew I could never become a classical pianist because I couldn’t sit still for five hours to practice; when I began training I realized that dance would become my music.”

That training began at the University of California–Irvine; Hollander dropped out when Merce Cunningham offered him a scholarship. He founded Battery Dance and began working in New York public schools in 1976, offering intensive choreographic workshops and technique classes. But, he says, “I felt we were missing something in those 10-week residencies, where we only touched the students twice a week.” So he began fine-tuning another model.

His Dancing to Connect workshop is a 20-hour process, involving participants from 14-year-olds to senior citizens. “It’s rigorous and requires a certain intellectual level, combined with the ability to work under pressure,” Hollander says. “Students participate in a performance with professionals, Battery Dance. The work is powerful in terms of emotion and authenticity of expression.”

In 2006 he worked in New York, Cambodia, and Germany. “In Cambodia the cultural attaché said, ‘I want the pieces done so the students can perform with Battery Dance in a command performance for the king of Cambodia,’” Hollander says. “We had taken a dive into a new methodology, where we elicit the movement from the participants. We give them exercises; we show and tell; we have them teach each other their materials. After 20 hours they can get up on a big stage and look authoritative because they are performing movement they created.

“We worked with apsara dancers,” he continues, “performers of the classical court dance of Cambodia, the first
ones trained after Pol Pot had done everything possible to kill them off.” Ever since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, young people wanted to do something more than traditional dance work, Hollander says. “The dancers we worked with did partnering, unison, counterpoint, mirroring. They never thought they could create.”

Over the next five years, Dancing to Connect proliferated, including traveling to 20 cities in Germany. It was then that Hollander first saw dancers and non-dancers working together; that first workshop experience led to a change in his belief system, he says. “I saw young people doing gestures onstage that brought tears to my eyes. It was stunning, fraught with meaning. That changed me.”

To date, the program has offered training in 45 countries and territories in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America.

The format
The first day is an icebreaker—participants share their stories and connections to dance. “The teaching artists modulate their approach depending on what they learn: the issues in the participants’ lives, the social component,” Hollander says. “A variety of narrative material emerges in those conversations. Then the attendees do a warm-up, get into their bodies and out of their heads. It’s closer to calisthenics than to ballet barre; we don’t want to intimidate anyone.”

Next, Hollander and his staff offer exercise challenges, “things that create movement,” he says. “Writing their names in the air with different body parts gets them moving in a four-dimensional way. If there are ballet students, it gets them out of thinking they’ll be doing ballet combinations. We don’t say no to anything; we just keep encouraging exploration. Our teaching artists pair up people and have one teach the other their phrase. They learn to memorize movement, how to repeat something cool. The pair become a team, become pals, reinforce each other.”

On the second day they learn to differentiate “the elements of choreography, the mechanics,” Hollander says. “What are the different things you can do to manipulate bodies in space? We start building more complex structures. By the end of the third day we have 15 minutes of material we’ll digest down to a six- or seven-minute piece. Then the teaching artists play selections of music, and explore ideas of pacing, dynamics, theme and rhythm, musicality: what is driving the piece?”

On the fourth day, they create the piece. “If there are outstanding dancers, we want to give them a chance to shine, but we don’t want anyone to be in the back row all the time. We want to give everybody a positive experience,” Hollander says. He and the technical director and lighting designer talk about elements of production and design. “Everything we do points to ‘You own this piece,’ giving students the power, the control, the leadership,” he says. “We want people to self-evaluate. We’re part of American cultural diplomacy, supported by the State Department. Democratic values are being con-

“We don’t say no to anything; we just keep encouraging exploration.”

—Jonathan Hollander
After months of long-distance learning, Iraqi student Aadel Qies Aadel (right) and Scantlebury met in Jordan to prep for an Amman Jazz Festival performance.

"We want you to contribute, and we want you to respect your peers; don't listen to us, listen to each other."

Day five is spent doing run-throughs and preparing for performance; on day six they go into the theater, where they learn about spacing and how to function backstage. Many of the participants have never been on a stage before. The performance, also on the sixth day, includes five short pieces, plus repertory pieces danced by Battery Dance. Seeing their teaching artists as professional performers—and sharing the stage with them—thrills the participants, says Hollander.

**The Institute**

The Dancing to Connect Institute "evolved out of these years of doing the program," Hollander says. The 2012 pilot program trained a dance teacher from Morocco, Hind Benali, and a former American Marine, Roman Baca, to help veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq re-adapt to life in the U.S.

In the three sessions since that pilot, held in the New York studios, people have come from Belfast, Nigeria, and India, and from American colleges and New York City public schools. "We've gotten grants from the NEA to help build this program," says Hollander. "It's a combination of theoretical and practical training; they work in the studio on the Dancing to Connect material, and then go into a public school and run the program with our teachers."

Panels on cultural diplomacy share Battery Dance's "case study in how to use dance in community," he says. "What is community? How can thinking dance teachers who are interested in world events combine their social conscience with their art?" The company has developed a "cultural diplomacy toolkit."
The experience

In bringing Dancing to Connect to various sites, Hollander asks for five days, four hours a day. "We have to adapt wherever we go," he says. "In Vietnam, students have incredibly long school days. We had a maximum of three hours a day, starting at six or seven at night. Then they had to get home, do homework; some of them have jobs. I pushed the performance to a Tuesday so we had the weekend to work."

In Maubeuge, a depressed area in northern France that has a large Algerian population, people in their 50s worked in the same group with teenagers. In Witten, Germany, teens
worked with an 80-year-old woman. In Argentina, Hollander says, the level of dance training is excellent, “but there’s no money and no work. Sean [Scantlebury] had a local teaching artist working with him; I was worried she’d think it was ridiculous to be learning from him, but she’s been raving about the experience. Sometimes even more local people participate. In India, where we worked with teenage survivors of human trafficking, there were three dance movement therapists for every one of our instructors.”

He calls his methodology “a pathway to performance. We don’t describe it as therapy, though it can be a healing experience.”

In each location, Hollander tries to bring in local teaching artists so that they will help to perpetuate Dancing to Connect’s impact long past its stay. The most successful example of the program’s sustainability, he says, is in Athens, Greece, where “a partnership between the Onassis Cultural Centre and the U.S. Embassy has led to a three-year sequence of Dancing to Connect programs in three cities. The second and third years have been led by the Greek teaching artists with supervision by Battery Dance teachers.”

And in Montevideo, Uruguay, two of the teaching artists Dancing to Connect worked with are starting their own workshop. “We had no qualms; they’d been given a lot of responsibility by the Battery Dance teaching artists,” Hollander says. “Our expectation is that people will take elements they like and carry them forward; they don’t have to do it the way we do it. We have some cardinal rules: first and foremost is that we only use the carrot and not the stick. We encourage participants to lose self-consciousness, to stop thinking there’s a right answer, and to counteract any sense of competition. There’s a lot of cross-fertilization going on.”

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