Jonathan Hollander

40 years, 65 countries, over 100 choreographies... these are numbers dreams are made up of for any Company’s director. How do you feel when you look back at this cherished journey?

It may seem disingenuous but I really don’t have much time to reflect on the past. I have vivid and wonderful memories and I do cherish them, but it is the present and future that fascinate me and spur me on. I always have too many ideas, too many projects in mind and neither enough time nor the resources to do justice to them all. Therefore I am a runner, chasing after the next opportunity. I think the dancers who read this will understand and relate because we all share the same passion for creating, performing, challenging and at the same time, giving our utmost to audiences wherever we find them.

Durga Project, your company’s most recent production featured Karnataka’s Unnath Jain. What was it like to work with him?

Unnath melded into the Battery Dance ‘family’ as seamlessly as could be possible, given the very different movement training and vocabulary from which he came. It was our aim to develop a new kind of movement and approach, which is why we thought of inviting a classically trained Bharatanatyam performer to interact with our contemporary and ballet-trained dancers. Fortunately, Unnath’s background in yoga and folk dance served him well in approaching the curvilinear lines of contemporary dance. Since Bharatanatyam has no tradition of partnering, that was one area in which Unnath really had to open up and learn literally from scratch. His natural humility and willingness to take direction from dancers his own age, allowed him to progress rapidly and surprisingly, the duet he and Robin Cantrell created together became one of the centerpieces of the entire work.

Your relationship with India dates back to the 60’s and is still going very strong. The influences of Indian culture have been abundantly seen in your work. Have you ever felt another connect like this with any other country you have worked with?

Actually, my first experience with India dates back to 1968 when I lived as an Indian, in an Indian family in Bombay. That was when I met Jhaveri Sisters the Manipuri Dancers and the Bharatanatyam Guru Parvati Kumar and his most accomplished student, Sucheta Bhide Chapekar. Since I was introduced to India in such a rich and profound way at an early age, I do feel that the country has woven its strands into my DNA and that despite my love for the French culture and many others, India occupies a unique and unchallengeable position.

Your company has invited several guest artistes from various countries. Do you see a difference in these artistes (other than their styles). Or does Art truly transcend borders?

Dancers, wherever they are from, are as unique as snowflakes. However, there are some characteristics that are common to all. It seems to me that choosing to be a dancer is something that only headstrong and non-conformist people would do. There is so much pressure to succeed in life and success in most cultures equals money, power and status. Dancers do, of course, hope to achieve renown and loving appreciation from the public, but money? Power? Status? These are not normally attainable, no matter how talented or accomplished the dancer might be.

We understand that you wanted to present Durga Project in such a way that it wouldn’t imitate India or depict a westerner’s idea of what India is. How did you manage to handle this delicately?
Perhaps if I put it into visual terms… we wanted to find diagonals, curves, not straight lines. Or in scientific terms… we wanted to create alchemy, an alloy that hasn’t yet been discovered. We wanted to invent something that didn’t exist before. If the goal was to make an ‘Indian piece’, then why not have an entire cast of Indian dancers? Even in New York, there are many truly excellent dancers of any Indian style who could have been sourced. But no – this was about stretching the artistry of the Battery Dance Company itself. Our dancers are refined, technically powerful and expressive in their individual ways. But they are also seekers – constantly looking for new experience. And Unnath shares these qualities of refinement, coupled with a questing nature. Together, something magical happened that cannot be described but has to be seen.

What has been your motivation and biggest takeaway from the Annual Battery Dance Festival held at New York over the past few decades?

Dance is often hidden away in small theaters, where only the cognoscenti will go. From the beginning of our foray into outdoor performance, we were determined to expand the access to dance – to share with a larger, broader, more diverse audience, the art form to which our lives are dedicated. We were rewarded by the growing interest and attention by people in our home community of lower Manhattan. Another goal was to educate the audience by bringing in dance of many genres, mixing it up, and yet adhering to a policy of high integrity and quality. By having Flamenco followed by Post-modern, followed by Kathak, and rounding it out with ballet or tap dance, we saw that audiences were more open-minded than producers sometimes believe. 35 years of presenting dance on outdoor stages in New York City, for free, has earned us the respect and affection that we couldn’t have hoped for had we taken the safer path. We wanted to invent something that didn’t exist before. We wanted to create alchemy, an alloy that hasn’t yet been discovered. But no – this was about stretching the artistry of the Battery Dance Company itself. Our dancers are refined, technically powerful and expressive in their individual ways. But they are also seekers – constantly looking for new experience. And Unnath shares these qualities of refinement, coupled with a questing nature. Together, something magical happened that cannot be described but has to be seen.

Your company co-produces Erasing Borders, a much talked about collaborative dance Festival. What made you take organizing up a notch, to include several artistes in order to showcase various forms and styles of dance from across the world?

Erasing Borders is the name given to an annual series of indoor and outdoor performances of Indian dance, curated by the Indo-American Arts Council. I founded the IAAC with Aroon Shivdasani who became its driving force as Executive Director. She and her curators, Rajika Puri and Uttara Coorlawala, asked me if Erasing Borders could be absorbed into the Battery Dance Festival for its outdoor presentations. I was initially skeptical because I thought that Indian dance would suffer without the intimacy and focus of a theater. But I was wrong. Even from the first year, crowds thronged to see the exquisite artistes in all of the classical and many of the folk and innovative styles that have been presented on the Battery Dance Festival stages under the auspices of Erasing Borders.

Battery Dance Company organizes ‘Dancing to Connect’, which has workshops designed to empower and include socially excluded and downtrodden sectors. Do tell us what made you look beyond the proscenium for dance and what inspired you to touch the lives of so many people through this philanthropic vision?

My aspiration to become an agent of positive change in the world has always been as powerful as my artistic mission. I reject the idea that only the less talented artists become teachers. I don’t see why one can’t do it all or at least try. Life is a balance and for me, that balance must not be limited. A personal transformation occurred when I saw young people in Germany, choreographing their own dances in 2006 under the guidance of the Battery Dancers. This was the beginning of Dancing to Connect. My tear ducts were well-lubricated by the end of those workshops, and the movements and gestures, as performed by the young people who devised them, were so powerful and compelling that I thought, ‘No, I don’t want to see Baryshnikov or Birju Maharaj doing that – I want to see that callow teenage boy making that authentic statement in the middle of the stage. Yes!’

Choreographies are like babies. One rarely picks a favourite. Do you have a favourite from all your works of excellence?

Most of my works I am content to forget, though there are a handful that I still love and would love to see performed over and over. Shell Games and Layapriya are two of them. At this moment, I feel as if the response to The Durga Project, my own and the New York audience’s, is among the strongest and most rare. I do hope to bring it to India next year.

Financial woes are a given for any dance Company. How have you managed to keep going for so long? What keeps you grounded?

The late great Indrani (Rehman) once counseled me, ‘Jonathan dear, you can only have one goddess looking after you. Either it is Saraswati or Mahalaxmi, but not both. For you, it is Saraswati.’ Indrani knew what she was talking about because the same was true for her. It has been a constant worry and a constant effort to sustain and build my company, and to compensate my staff and artistes fairly. One gets tougher and asking for help, never easy, becomes a bit less humiliating as the years go on.

India is now home to quite a few budding dance companies which are being founded by passionate and driven young dancers. What advice would you dispense to them?

Don’t allow internecine battles and mean-spirited competitiveness to fracture your community. In order to improve conditions for all, there must be cooperation and community spirit. Find your natural spokespeople and get behind them. Reject the status quo and calmly, clearly and cohesively lobby the local,
state and federal government agencies to increase their funding. Ban the practice of corporate and other signage and branding on the backdrops of dance stages; act up against the buying of awards which cheapens the entire enterprise of dance; and hold tight to the selling of tickets for all performances, eliminating the ‘by invitation’ practice which plagues the Indian dance scene.

What has been the most trying moment of your career? How did you get past it?
I once had an electric shock pass through my body when I read an e-mail in which sponsorship that had been promised for a major tour (on which we were about to embark) evaporated. Over the course of the entire tour, I was running from pillar to post to salvage performances. My health suffered and I almost fainted in a hotel elevator, praying that it would reach my floor before I expired. Fortunately, I did reach that floor and various people came to my aid and rallied support and we managed to fulfill the entire tour.

Do we get to see more of Battery Dance Company in India this year?
We will be performing on tour in Germany, South Korea and Sri Lanka later this year, but we have high hopes of performing, teaching and collaborating in India in 2017.

If you weren’t a dancer/choreographer, what else would you be today?
Something happened to me in my youth: Dance got into me and filled me with happiness. I found my groove. I cannot imagine any other one.

“I see great talent in the younger generation in India and am thrilled that so many young people are having the courage to enter the dance field. India has the richest dance culture of any country in the world, there is tremendous potential and scope for meaningful careers in the dance field.”