Dance Company Will Pay Homage to Fallen Artist

Adel Euro, a hip-hop-obsessed dancer in Iraq, died in the July suicide-bomb attack on Baghdad

By PIA CATTON
Updated Aug. 12, 2016 8:00 p.m. ET

Battery Dance Festival in Tribeca will pay tribute on Sunday to a dance career that might have been—were it not for a terrorist’s bomb.

Adel Euro, a hip-hop-obsessed dancer in Iraq, died in the July suicide-bomb attack on Baghdad that killed more than 200 people. He had been a protégé of New York choreographer and Battery Dance Company founder Jonathan Hollander, who served as Adel’s artistic mentor, arranging for him to take dance lessons via Skype in 2014 and helping him pursue a visa and a possible career in the U.S.

Adel’s death was covered in media outlets from CNN International to Dance Magazine, some of which had covered his plight. Now, his story has inspired Battery to create a new program aimed at helping artists seeking political asylum in the U.S. and changing perceptions of Middle Eastern youth.
Adel had been defying the odds by pursuing a Western-based art form, and building an artistic presence, in Baghdad—even taking the risky step of training other hip-hop dance hopefuls.

He did it with resources that amounted to determination, an internet connection and the Michael Jackson videos he mimicked.

Meanwhile, he was obtaining a law degree to help bolster his immigration profile. All that was percolating before a 24th birthday he never saw.

For Mr. Hollander, the dancer's death was a personal and professional loss. Since founding his Tribeca-based Battery Dance Company in 1976, the choreographer has expanded beyond presenting his own stage work to be an advocate for cultural diplomacy around the world.

With his company, he created an outreach program called Dancing to Connect, which uses the nonverbal art of dance to encourage creativity, collaboration and healing, especially in locations struggling with or recovering from conflict. The program has visited about 45 countries.

“We want to challenge the idea of what a dance company can be in the world,” said Mr. Hollander.

When Dancing to Connect traveled in 2012 to Erbil, in the Kurdish region of Iraq, Adel wasn’t part of the workshop. But after hearing about it, he sought out Mr. Hollander online.

Mr. Hollander then paired the young Iraqi with Sean Scantlebury, a dancer and choreographer from his own company. For Sunday’s tribute, Mr. Scantlebury has choreographed a dance that will be performed by three Iraqi dancers who knew Adel.

They include Hussein Smko Khudhir, a 22 year-old dancer from Erbil now living in Niagara, N.Y. He found himself hooked on dance after meeting an American soldier who showed him how to do the “wave,” a breakdance move for the arms.
“I thought, ‘how did bones crack?’” said Mr. Khudhur, who was about 10 years old at the time. “I practiced that for two years.”

On Sunday, Mr. Khudhur will dance a solo to lead off the festival, which will also include the launch of Battery Dance’s latest project, the Adel Euro Campaign.

This two-part effort will begin by financially assisting dancers, starting with Mr. Khudhur, who are establishing themselves in the U.S. It will then form a small troupe, the Dancers Seeking Refuge Ensemble, to tour U.S. colleges with the goal of presenting a positive image of Middle Eastern young people.

Support for the new campaign started with Battery Dance’s board, led since 2012 by a former foreign-service officer, Helena Kane Finn. During her 30-year career at the State Department, she helped Mr. Hollander and his dancers take their collaborative program around the world.

“He wasn’t just going and saying ‘Here’s what our dancers do. Copy this,’” she said. “He was working with underprivileged young people and helping them create original work.”

While the Adel Euro Campaign’s ensemble will focus on touring to U.S. sites, it is based on a personal story of how the arts can help people overcome steep odds and make global connections.

“Adel had what it would take,” said Mr. Hollander, who saw early on that the dancer had raw talent but lacked the rigorous training that dancers usually have early in life. “With daily classes, he could have made up what he missed.”

Write to Pia Catton at pia.catton@wsj.com