

*** World-renowned U.S. dance group Battery Dance tours Sri Lanka**

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Dec 08, Colombo: Battery Dance Company, a world-renowned contemporary dance troupe from New York City will conclude its tour of Sri Lanka with a gala "Drums and Dance" performance in collaboration with Chandana Wickramasinghe's Dancer's Guild and Asoka Wickramaratne's Naadro at Bishop's College on December 12 at 7:00 p.m.

This public show completes Battery Dance's nearly two weeks of programs featuring exchanges with top Sri Lankan dance companies, honorary shows, and training workshops with local students.







"The American Embassy is proud to bring Battery Dance to showcase the strong cultural and people-to-people bonds between our two countries," said U.S. Embassy's Chargé d'Affaires Robert Hilton.

In 62 countries over the past 40 years, the New York-based Battery Dance has worked in difficult places that suffer from violent conflicts and interethnic tensions. Its "Dancing to Connect" philosophy is used to bring those different communities together to promote artistic excellence, cultivate the young leaders of tomorrow, and make dance accessible to everyone.

Chargé d'Affaires Hilton stressed the company's tour is not only a great opportunity for audiences to enjoy their artistry, but a key aspect of the Embassy's cultural diplomacy. "We share the same passion as the people of Sri Lanka for a united, democratic, and inclusive nation," he added.

During its tour, Battery Dance performed its signature "Raag Durga" piece in the NatFest dance festival and held workshops for the master performers of Chitrasena Dance Company. Traveling to Kandy, Battery Dance offered a free performance at Gateway College and classes with University of Peradeniya students. Finally, founder and artistic director Jonathan Hollander held a public lecture on the business aspects of the arts, while production manager Barry Steele spoke about lighting and sound design.

Sunday Observer

BATTERY DANCE TROUPE : EXPRESSIONS OF EXCELLENCE

11 December, 2016

by Dishan Joseph

The Art



New York is a very happening place in America. It has this ability to showcase the finest in almost every sphere. This past week I was able to meet one of New York's finest sons, Jonathan Hollander a globally acclaimed artistic director/ choreographer and dancer along with his magnificent Battery Dance troupe. The most immediate trait visible in Jonathan was his humility. He seemed very much at home in Colombo as this was his fourth visit to sunny paradise. We were joined by the amiable Joseph Schaller, Cultural Affairs Officer of the American Embassy.



Jonathan Hollander

Jonathan had an early start in music, beginning at the tender age of five. He learnt to play the piano, his beloved mother being an accomplished pianist. His father was an attorney. Jon soon realised that he had a strong connection not only to music but to the performing arts, which he adds has a deeper spiritual essence. He has been immensely involved in concerts for four decades, having travelled to sixty five countries. The dance company is based in Manhattan, New York.

I am joined by three other members of his group young Unath Hasan Rathnaraju from India, Stoian Razvan from Romania and radiant Robin Cantrell from the US who was very keen to see an elephant! The cultural mix within the team is one of the unique attributes of Battery Dance. Jonathan is convinced that the dancers who join him are led to be in his team, rather than simply joining by the customary audition.

Motivated

Hasan Rathnaraju is an expert in yoga and bharathanatyam. Presently reading for his PhD he tells me that the experience in NY has certainly motivated him. He also emphasizes the need within the Asian societies to encourage youth to pursue their dreams in art and related fields. He is absolutely correct in this revelation. Asian countries are full of parents who are so engrossed in pushing their children to achieve academic excellence that will yield bigger salaries.



These kids don't have time to engage in other creative avenues of expression. Sri Lanka with its own rich heritage in music and dance once excelled in this realm, during the time of our glorious monarchs who were wise enough to build concert pavilions in their regal palaces. It is they who envisaged and consistently encouraged dance related pageants, culminating in the grand temple perehara. The excited young Romanian dancer Razvan was deeply impressed with the feedback of local audiences from their previous night's performance.

Jonathan Hollander points out that the name of the band Battery can relate to the energy one finds in a battery. The percussion section in an orchestra is also known by this name. He has

successfully used his dance routines to promote various humane causes the most recent in Germany, when they performed to support refugees. Jon strongly believes that music and dance can connect people and reconcile misunderstandings.

Back in the US they have been performing at a dance festival since 1985, which they organize. The dance troupe can take pride in being a non- profit charity, as making money is not their priority. Jon happily recalls meeting the King of Cambodia at one of their concerts. The team has used dance as a tool of diplomacy. The passionate performers are now excited to visit South Korea early next year.

Performers

The team has worked together with our own local artistes including the brilliant Nadro group who excel in their pulsating drum beats. Jonathan also lavishes his praise and appreciates the good work done by Niloufer Pieris in setting up a dance school in Colombo. Joseph Schaller of the US Embassy adds that they are very happy to bring in world class performers to Sri Lanka, and thereby give our young artistes a chance to learn and train with the best.

The scintillating moves of the Battery Dance company can be witnessed at a gala show on 12 December in Colombo at the Bishop's College Auditorium.

Brand new moves



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Print Edition

Ishara Jayawardane



Dance enriches the spirit. It is a universal language and it provides beauty and inspiration even in the bleakest of times. In its 40th Anniversary year, Battery Dance is a New York City-based, performing arts organization with a global reach; a non-profit charitable institution that stands for artistic excellence and social relevance, and the availability of the arts to all.

Battery Dance was on a cultural diplomacy tour of Sri Lanka sponsored by the US Embassy with cooperation from the leading dance organizations of Sri Lanka including Chitrasena Dance Company and Dancers Guild and Nelung Arts Centre. The tour comprised performances in Kandy and Colombo as well as a host of master classes, seminars and collaborations.

It is a collaboration of acclaimed Choreographer, Dancer and Founder of Dancer's Guild Chandana Wickramasinghe, and founder and leader of percussion company Nadroo, Rakitha Wickramaratne and Jonathan Hollander and his Battery Dancers.

Daily News spoke to President and Artistic Director, Battery Dance Company Jonathan Hollander & Chandana Wickramasinghe of Dancers Guild

“There are no proceeds as such – the expense of mounting a production of this magnitude exceeds the capacity of ticket sales. It is therefore a labor of love on the part of all involved,” said Hollander

Hollander feels that in order to have a palette for creation, choreographers must have a company of dancers on which to create.

“Hence, I launched Battery Dance initially as a creative laboratory for myself. It soon became much bigger than my own efforts could control and is now a unit of creative artists – dancers who are also choreographers and teachers in their own right,” stated Hollander

Battery Dance is dedicated to providing opportunities for young people to experience the art to which they are so passionately devoted.

Providing opportunities

“Therefore we seek every possible opportunity to share, teach, collaborate, present and perform. We explore the ways in which dance can be used as a vehicle for conflict resolution, for providing opportunities to the disenfranchised, disadvantaged and the differently abled. We produce New York’s longest-running public dance festival – the Battery Dance Festival – which brings the best of dance companies from New York and overseas free to the public each year in our home base of lower Manhattan. We teach in New York City’s public high schools. We represent the U.S. overseas as we are doing here. And when on tour, we seek to encourage the talented artists we find everywhere – in each and every stage of their careers,” explained Hollander

Battery Dance has developed a program entitled Dancing to Connect which has been conducted in over 45 countries.

“We believe that everyone is a dancer, whether or not they know it. One of our activities here in Colombo is a teacher training program in which we will share our best practices and methodologies with interested dancers and dance teachers as well as social workers and activists of all kinds this coming weekend, organized by the Chitrasena Dance Company,” pointed out Hollander.

Their funds come from a mix of government, foundation, corporate and individual donors as well as earned income from their commissioned performances



“I am a person who has been very much influenced by my background as the child of a musician and a government attorney. I explored all of the other art forms and realized that dance was a way to combine all of my interests,” shared Hollander.

Battery Dance is an ever-evolving juggernaut of an organization – gathering momentum and light from the many lives it touches, from the practitioners themselves and the various artists and people of all kinds.

Financial difficulties

“Every project we embark upon provides new challenges – we never feel like our lives are monotonous. There is a price to pay for this level of vitality - namely exhaustion, intense pressure from always having high aspirations and financial difficulties that face every arts organization no matter how successful,” informed Hollander

Company members on this tour are Sean Scantlebury, Robin Cantrell, Mira Cook, Bethany Mitchell and Razvan Stoian. Our guest artist from India is Unnath Hassan Rathnaraju. Our lighting designer is Barry Steele.

Fellow artists

The dancers range in age from late 20's to early 30's and have been with the Company from 14 years down to 1 month. They hail from Barbados, California, Minnesota, Texas, Florida, Romania and India.

Battery Dance are collaborating with Nadroo in a brand new production – ‘proPULSion’ – and with Dancers’ Guild – ‘Kanya’. They are also working on our newest production, ‘The Durga Project’

“We are thrilled to be in Sri Lanka and to have the opportunity to meet so many wonderful fellow artists here in Colombo and earlier this week in Kandy,” said Hollander

The rehearsals with Nadroo and Chandana and his Dancers’ Guild have been joyful. They have spent a lot of time preparing for these collaborations and the work they did is paying off.

“I believe that the passion is spread throughout our group and our Sri Lankan counterparts. No one would take up the professions of dance and music if they weren’t deeply and profoundly dedicated to it. Because they are some of the most demanding pursuits anyone could choose; and they do not make one economically comfortable and secure,” summed up Hollander.

This is a very good combination because Jonathan Hollander is a legend. So basically Dancers Guild and Naadro are the new generation.

“So we invited them to perform. We have an annual concert called Drums and Dance and this is our fifth concert. So we wanted to perform with an international company so we invited Jonathan Hollander from the USA along with his dance company called Battery Dance. The American Center helped to bring these guys to Sri Lanka,” said Chandana Wickramasinghe.

“So this is a good lesson for everyone in the industry how to cooperate with new comers and how to respect each culture. When it comes to age, I am in the middle and Naadro is very young and right now Jonathan is Chitrasena Masters age. Three different age groups but we respect each other and this is a good message to the Sri Lanka audience how to respect each culture. This is a fusion concert with different styles,” stated Chandana.

As a group it has been 30 years for Dancers Guild. We have travelled to many countries in the world.

Life changing experience

“I have worked with many senior artistes around the world, very different people so this time I am working with a legend. This is such a great and life changing experience and working with Jonathan. They are a lovely and dynamic team from the USA. This is something that gives color to the other

dances. It really makes you think differently. Because of the legend Jonathan Hollander this has become a milestone in my life,” explained Chandana

This is the first time something is happening like this in Colombo and the response has been phenomenal!

“Oh my God! People are talking about this! Everyone wants to see this concert not only the musicians and artistes. This excitement is not only by me and Rakitha and our dancers. Everyone is excited! This is a wonderful combination between USA and Colombo. This is a cultural event. All of Colombo is talking about this! This is something different,” pointed out Chandana excitedly.