

The Twain shall meet

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A Battery Dance Company production

Indian culture is the pivot of New York-based Battery Dance Company's choreographic works, which have travelled to several countries

"I feel that the essence of dance

is the expression of man — the landscape of his soul."

These words of the legendary dancer Martha Graham best describe the work of choreographer, social activist, founder and artistic director of The Battery Dance Company, Jonathan Hollander. He is perhaps the only American choreographer who, for more than 25 years, has been composing modern dance to Indian classical themes and music. When asked about what sustained his interest, Jonathan replied, "I have always been fascinated by the vast and diverse Indian cultural

traditions. The background that I enjoyed, immersed in it from an early age and interacting almost daily with dancers and musicians, has informed and inspired creative endeavours.”

His journey began at the age of 16, when he was selected by his high school for an exchange programme to India as an American field officer. The time he spent here with Siddharth and Nirupama Mehta, his Indian family, became a life-changing experience. They were philanthropists and connoisseurs of dance and impressed him profoundly with their humble lifestyle and involvement with social causes. They provided him opportunities to interact with great dancers such as the Jhaveri sisters and also watch Guru Parvati Kumar teach Sucheta Chapekar. He was mesmerised by the beauty of the dance movements and awestruck by the guru-sishya relationship. Deeply impacted by his cultural interactions, he returned to the U.S. to study ballet, jazz and modern dance at the University of California, Irvine.

Right perspective

Jonathan’s international exposure gave him the right perspective to focus on contributing to society through his Battery Dance Company, which he founded in 1976. His earliest initiative was to establish arts education residencies at primary, middle and high school levels in New York Public schools. He started ‘Dancing to Connect’, an intensive 20-hour programme, that brings together a diverse group of students to engage in creativity and team-building through modern dance. Since 2006, the Company has successfully implemented the programme in 50 countries. In Thailand, some of the students were rescued sex workers who experienced many horrors in their young lives and this programme had a therapeutic effect, helping them deal with their trauma. When the programme was held recently in Erbil, a Kurdish region in Iraq, Jonathan discovered a highly talented Iraqi street dancer, Hussein Smko, who became the first recipient of the Adel Euro Campaign for Dancers Seeking Refuge. Jonathan introduced him to elementary

school kids in the Midwest with the belief that dance talent can push through barriers even in the harshest territories.

Cross-border moves

“The irony of taking an Iraqi to Indiana to teach hip hop was not lost on anyone. It jump-started the campaign’s goal of countering Islamophobia in America”, says Jonathan. This May, he premièred, *On Foot, Echoes of Erbil, Reconstruction and Double Knot* at the Schimmel Center for Arts in New York, for his Company's 41st season, and dedicated it to immigrants.

The theme was an outcome of their decade-long engagement with refugees and youth in conflict zones, who overcame hurdles to rebuild their lives in new lands while mourning the loss of their destroyed families and homelands. He collaborated with Syrian-born visual artist Kevork Mourad to reinforce the powerful choreography with poignant visuals. The simple line drawings of construction, destruction and reconstruction, used imaginatively in the background as well as partially in the foreground, blended seamlessly with the brilliant choreography of meetings, partings and reconnections, to create a stunning visual impact.

Jonathan’s contribution to the Indian cultural scene has been significant and on a global scale. His ardent love for India has brought him to this country frequently, for dance productions, talent scouting, collaborations, workshops and seminars. In 1992, he came to India as a Fulbright professor of dance to MS University in Baroda. During this tenure, he travelled widely and witnessed great performances by many stalwarts in different dance styles. Since then, he has annually featured renowned Indian dancers such as C.V. Chandrasekhar, Mallika Sarabhai, Swapna Sundari, Rama Vaidyanathan, Arjun Misra and Shanmugasundaram, to name a few, at the Battery Dance Festival in New York. Jonathan has worked extensively with Indian dancers, musicians and costume designers to research and choreograph diverse

themes. Every one of his productions is unique and reflects his passion for Indian culture.

He made his choreographic debut in India with 'Moonbeam', featuring Mallika Sarabhai and Sashidharan Nair. It was staged in Ahmedabad in 1992 and was later presented in New York. For his next production, 'Seen by the River', he collaborated with Badal Roy, the first Indian jazz musician, to break into mainstream. In 1995, he premièred 'Songs of Tagore' in New York with his dance ensemble. He toured 17 cities in India with the production which received rave reviews. The same year he presented 'Purush: The Expressions of Man' at The Music Academy. It was greatly appreciated in India and also by the diaspora, when he later took it on an extensive US tour.

In 2014, Jonathan's Company conducted an outreach programme in Mumbai and New Delhi for survivors of human trafficking to address the issues of exclusion in society. It was a path-breaking and poignant moment when these people overcame their inhibitions and performed on stage.

In 2016, for the 40th anniversary of the Battery Dance Company, Jonathan choreographed 'The Durga Project,' to celebrate his long and eventful relationship with India. Initially inspired by the soul-stirring rendering of raag Durga by Pt. Rajan and Sajan Mishra, he later correlated it with the powerful imagery of Durga as the source of female power. Jonathan collaborated with Unnath Hassan Rathnaraju, a Bharatanatyam dancer from Karnataka, to perform with the ensemble and integrate Indian and western movements.

Jonathan is constantly seeking avenues to further explore fresh Indian concepts and showcase them to the world. He longs to bring 'The Durga Project' to India and present it as Shakti — A Return to the Source with a fervent hope that Indian audiences will appreciate his non-religious interpretation of Durga as a feminine force portrayed through the universal language of dance.