

DANCING TO CONNECT IRAQ, APRIL, 2012



Healing the wounds of war – building teams – celebrating creativity among youth

Working collaboratively with American and local partners, Battery Dance Company of New York used the art of dance as a medium for healing and youth empowerment in Iraq. Employing Battery Dance Company's signature arts education methodology, *Dancing to Connect (DtC)*, a pair of American teaching artists engaged with 28 Iraqi students, ages 17 – 22, and two local teacher trainees over a period of one week. They worked in a group that crossed gender, religious, social and geographic boundaries. Together and under the guidance of BDC's teaching artists, the students created choreography that spoke to the issues of inclusion/exclusion, the struggles of living in a war-torn country, and their hopes for a better future. As the process went forward, the initial differences between the students melted away.

The Dancing to Connect program in Iraq was originally inspired by a highly unusual circumstance: Roman Baca, a choreographer and a Marine veteran who had served in Fallujah, approached Battery Dance Company to host him as a Fellow of The Mission Continues. TMC is a non-profit organization founded by Eric Greitens, a former Navy Seal, that provides support for Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans, funding their service in community organizations in the U.S. to regain their strength and purpose.



Beginning in January, 2012, Baca was trained by Battery Dance Company in leading Dancing to Connect workshops for youth and young adults and eventually worked side-by-side with BDC teaching artists in New York City public schools. Given his earlier experience in Iraq and his concern for the Iraqi people, Jonathan Hollander, Artistic Director of Battery Dance Company, posed the question, “Would you like to return to Iraq?” Baca’s affirmative answer prompted Hollander to approach the NEA/PPD

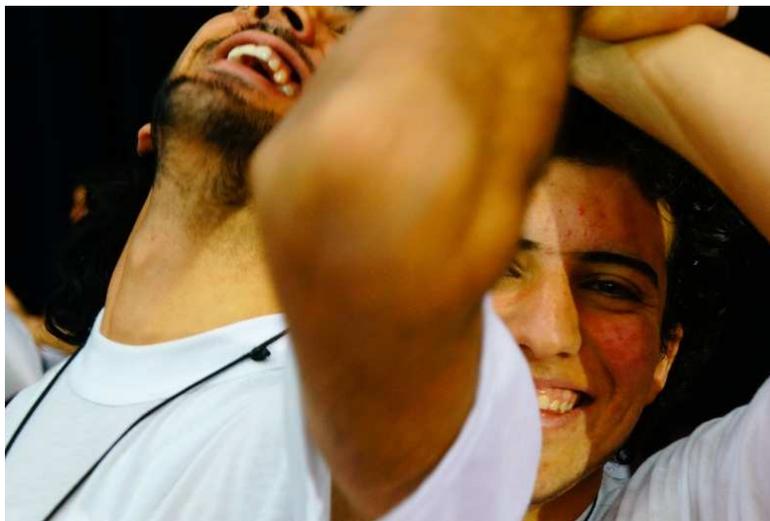
Office in Washington and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to propose a Dancing to Connect program. Knowing that Baca would need the support of at least one of BDC’s experienced teaching artists, Hollander asked the Battery Dance Company members for volunteers to go to Iraq. Each and every member expressed an interest in going. Robin Cantrell was selected – in part because of the fact that Hollander wanted to have a man and a woman lead the program, anticipating that there would be mixed genders among the workshops participants.

The Embassy in Baghdad forwarded BDC’s proposal to the Consulate in Kirkuk, where Susan Harville, the Public Affairs Officer, responded enthusiastically. Sue and Jonathan began putting the plans in place. Sue was already working with a group of young people in her English language program and felt that the DtC workshops would be a great experience, a reward of sorts, for them. However, because security conditions in Kirkuk wouldn’t lend themselves to an easy flow for students coming into the Consular Compound, or for the American teaching artists to go out into the City each day, she proposed to move the venue to Erbil. This required the active cooperation of her counterpart at the Consulate in Erbil, Matthew Ference. He agreed on the condition that students from Erbil could also participate.



In the end, a group of 19 students from Kirkuk drove up to Erbil with a teacher from the Institute of Fine Arts and Helen Patou from the Consulate. They stayed in a hotel for the duration of the program. Ten students from Erbil and one teacher formed the complement of the group.

Over the course of the week, the students worked with Baca and Cantrell, learning the craft of choreography as a vehicle for expressing their emotions and creative visions. None of the participants had taken formal dance classes in the past. Many were students at the Institutes of Performing Arts where they were studying acting or directing. As such, everyone began the process on a similar, very fundamental level. They knew very little about the medium of dance and even less about the art of choreography. Baca and Cantrell coaxed the students into devising movement by giving them a variety of tasks that built from individual creative movement phrases into group choreography. The differences between the students from the two cities were noticeable at the beginning of the workshop. They ate lunch on different sides of the courtyard and expressed passionate opinions and observations about one another in discussions. As the workshop developed, and the teaching artists initiated the mixing of demographics, the differences disappeared. On the last day of the workshop the students from both cities and religions were intermingled, professing friendship, and singing traditional songs together.



Dancing to Connect Participants Practicing their Choreography

Venues:

Logistics were the most difficult challenges in this program. A week before the program was to take place, Peshawar Hall, the only theater in Erbil with a wooden floor suitable for dance, which had been promised by the Ministry, was suddenly made unavailable. The DtC program was transferred to a large theater with a carpeted stage and an archaic (unusable) sound and light system. Although this space was ultimately used for the daily 5-hour workshop, the carpeting and lack of technical equipment and staff would make it inappropriate for the final performance. On one of the workshop days, the teaching artists were told that the theater was unavailable and that they would have to use the art gallery space. The gallery was about half the size needed and its walls were covered with valuable art that students had to work very hard to avoid. In the end, the workshops were moved outdoors for most of the day.

The theater that was ultimately chosen for the final performance was located around the corner from the original space. The director of the theater department had been working for months on a play that was to be presented on the same evening as the Dancing to Connect performance. This theater was already equipped with staff and a light grid, and since some of the workshop students were also his students, a deal was struck that allowed BDC and the Dancing to Connect group to use the theater on the same evening, making it a two-for-one performance. The theater director's stipulation was that his set would have to be used and that it could not be removed. The set included a very thin white plastic (much like a disposable table cloth) with the same material used as wings. Since the floor beneath the table cloth was rotting, and the table cloth itself slippery, Baca and Cantrell decided that a MarleySM floor had to be purchased and laid at intermission. This turned out to be the second biggest obstacle. Marley doesn't seem to exist in Iraq. Baca and Cantrell ended up going to the bazaar and haggling for far too long with the only flooring dealer in the city. He offered something close to MarleyTM, although thinner and navy blue. It was good enough. Finding tape for the floor was equally difficult. The BDC team had arrived with one roll of tape from NY but it would not be enough for the entire floor. After being directed to multiple tables in the bazaar, clear packing tape was settled upon. Ultimately, most of the floor ended up being stapled to the stage anyway. What



was not difficult was the laying of the floor. In the 20 minute break between shows, all of the students united to lay the entire floor in 10 minutes flat. Baca and Cantrell were in awe.

The Dancing to Connect performance followed the Iraqi play and opened with a traditional Iraqi piece staged by the students. Robin Cantrell performed a solo. Roman Baca gave a very moving speech about his time in Iraq and how it differed from his current DTC project. The students closed the show with their Dancing to Connect piece. However, since the theatre was being shared with the university drama department, they performed an hour-long play, followed by a lengthy intermission, followed by the Dancing to Connect performance.

Social/Religious Issues:

The BDC Teaching Artists were initially concerned about the difficulty of having males and females dance together. There were multiple occasions where the females indicated that they did not feel comfortable with a certain exercise (usually anything that involved opposite sex contact) and had to sit out. However, the ladies showed no hesitation when the work was actually created. Baca and Cantrell were proud of their students' ability to overcome their discomfort in the final performance. There was a marked difference between the students from Erbil and those from Kirkuk. The Erbil students were more gregarious, and playful, and their general appearance was more at ease. The Kirkuk students were clean cut and generally more focused and reserved. However, all of the participants were drama students at their respective universities, so they were probably not the norm for Iraqi culture. The BDC team also noticed that there was a great deal of respect that was expected to be shown, specifically towards older males. When these protocols of behavior were not followed, it was clear that these men were not happy. Although these displays of respect were often time consuming, I believe they were necessary to accomplish anything in the country.



Receiving Certificates after the Performance

Cultural Adaptation:

"Don't Worry" and "No Problem" were phrases that were heard often. That usually meant that we should worry because there was a problem. Baca and Cantrell were constantly on edge, worrying about how the final performance could possibly come together with so many set-backs. They were told that there was no need to let anyone know about the show more than one day in advance. Local partners explained that in Iraq, if the information is given out too early, people will not come. Sure enough, all the partners did was make a few phone calls the day before the show, and place one banner outside of the theater just before the event, and the house was full. Iraq is not New York. Cantrell also had to get used to being the only female out on the street, the only female out at night, and the only female in the all-male section of the restaurants.

Training the Trainers:

Baca and Cantrell were originally paired with 4 teaching assistants. Only 2 reappeared after the first day. They were not dancers, but theater teachers, and over the age of 50. Hawar and Sabah were very involved in the process and they found the workshop very helpful. Although, since they had no prior dance training, it is not anticipated that they will lead Dancing to Connect programs per se; but they seemed very certain that the project and the exercises they had learned would be directly applicable to the theater program.

Personal Reflections of Robin Cantrell, Teaching Artist:

I was totally surprised by the Iraqi sense of humor. These were perhaps the funniest people I had ever worked with. They made a joke of everything. In fact, when one student told a story of his baby sister dying, everyone laughed. I was amazed. But then they explained that this is the way they have developed to cope with the constant death and violence: with laughter. For one of our exercises we asked them to give us a visualization of what life is like in Iraq. They said it



looked like a CD stuck on repeat. And for one of our exercises we asked them to give us words to describe Iraq. I will include a few here:

unfair, unjust, sadness, trial, envy, poverty, lies, corruption, betrayal, discrimination

coexistence, love, freedom, hope, victory, trust, laughter, beautiful, loyalty, unity

PR/Outreach:

Because of the advance press and media outreach done by Battery Dance Company and The Mission Continues, various international news outlets were aware of the program. There was advance coverage with in the Wall Street Journal and on various NPR radio stations in the U.S. The angle of a Marine returning to Iraq as part of a cultural



diplomacy program appears to have been an attractive hook for the American press; and led to a television feature on NBC news in New York City (that was repeated many times over in all of the taxi-cab mini T.V. screens for a day or two after the initial release.)

Battery Dance Company communicated with assignment editors at Reuters, New York Times and People Magazine. Reuters assigned a cameraman/journalist who stayed with the project throughout the duration and filed video material which was picked up by various American television stations. The New York Times and People Magazine were unable to assign reporters to cover the program but asked for photos afterwards. Unfortunately, Post was unable to provide professional photography coverage and Roman and Robin were too pressed, running the workshops, to do anything other than cursory photography (which is seen in this report.) These photos were not of a quality that People or NYT could use.

The only direct "media" outreach that we were aware of for the project in Erbil was a banner placed outside of the theater alerting passersby to the existence of the final show. It was displayed about one hour before show-time. Against all odds, the house was full!



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