



Dance

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DANCE DIPLOMACY

Healing a Hundred Years of Hatred One Step at a Time

by Gillian Jakob

“An animal of a man shouted, ‘You must dance,
dance when our drum beats.’
With fury whips cracked
On the flesh of these women.
Hand in hand the brides began their circle dance.”

—from *The Dance*, Siamanto (1910)

In his brutal poem bewailing the beginnings of the genocide, renowned Armenian poet Siamanto used the imagery of dance as a weapon of humiliation’s prelude to slaughter. A hundred years later, dance is being used as a bridge over the century-old abyss between Turks and Armenians. DanceMotion USA, a cultural diplomacy initiative sponsored by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and produced by BAM, facilitated a contemporary dance collaboration among artists from the three nations. The performances were staged August 14 – 16 at BAM’s Fishman Space. Admission, like the conscience after confession, was free.

Dancers Alper Marangoz and Davit Grigoryan, Turk and Armenian, stood transfixed amidst the other moving bodies, pulled into a supported collapse only to quickly push away: one standing erect, the other pressed into the ground. A breath later they were face-to-face in a tender moment of apology. This choreographed phrase of reconciliation was one of a hundred fleeting cultural exchanges in “Unsettled,” the hour-long collaborative piece by David Dorfman Dance of New York and Korhan Basaran Company of Istanbul.

Dorfman’s company was asked by DanceMotion USA to travel to Turkey, Tajikistan, and Armenia in search of artists to invite back to the States for a collaborative project. In each of the three nations, David Dorfman dancers not only performed, but also workshopped with local artists and companies with the collaboration in mind. The project would begin with a month-long residency at Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, Maine where Dorfman’s company and their guests would choreograph and stage a piece to be performed at BAM.

In Istanbul, Dorfman connected with choreographer Korhan Basaran and his dancers. In an interview before opening night, Dorfman recalled how a former student of his happened to be friends with Basaran

and enthusiastically suggested the two meet. Basaran had been busy working with his project-based multimedia company, which premiered “Heva,” a piece on Rumi and Sufism, last year. He’d also been pursuing his artistic interest in the tumult in Turkey surrounding last year’s riots in Gezi Park.

“I got to see the folks that Korhan works with in Istanbul,” Dorfman said, “and I was really impressed by their dancing and the way they made dances. So I spoke to Michael [Blanco, director of DanceMotion USA] and I said, ‘could you consider Korhan for the company that we bring back because I feel he’s really, really great.’ He’s a real leader—really talented, and I love the people in his company.”

Basaran’s company had spent 2009 – 12 in New York, and so while the two companies were not completely unfamiliar with one another’s movement and spoken vocabularies, there were translators at the work sessions and the dancing took some time to cohere. “[The Basaran Company members are] really gifted movers,” Dorfman said in one of the behind the scenes YouTube videos. “I mean tremendously gifted, and yet not the exact style in which we move. People can have different tendencies and yet we can meet in the middle.”

On Dorfman’s visit to Armenia, the company held four workshops with Armenian artists. There, he met Yerevan-based dancers Karen Khachatryan and Davit Grigoryan. Following a series of auditions at which they stood out, Khachatryan and Grigoryan were invited to join the U.S. and Turkish companies for the project. The cultural diplomacy initiative was to “promote themes of reconciliation,” in this case, encountering the Turkish-Armenian divide through cross-collaboration.

The piece on August 14th was a meditation on this national conflict as well as an abstract representation of micro-reconciliation: fragments of stories and danced relationships between and among the individuals on stage.

“We’re dealing with the subject matter—not just about Turkey and Armenia—but about personal reconciliation,” Dorfman said. “About travesties that we do to each other unfortunately, about sorrys, about thank yous.”

Some of these personal sorrys and thank yous worked. Others fell flat. The best-executed moments humanized the dancers with humor. Beyond mere comedic relief in the middle of solemn musings, there was an unsettling disconnect between what was said, who was saying it, and how it was interpreted. At one point, American dancer Raja Feather Kelly, one of the most beautiful movers in the piece, darted behind his fellow dancers as a ventriloquist. The chat began whimsically as a sort of word association: spurring nonsensical lines about sleepovers, blue popsicles, and hair extensions. The schizophrenic monologue became dark as Kelly manipulated each arm to point at a single body, Bryan Strimpel, and then ran through the still figures demanding that they say “sorry.” The anger turned inward as Kelly began to sob—initially sharp in its emotional power, and then uncomfortable as the duration stretched, fizzled, and lost its provocative merit.

The transitions from the more performative passages of spoken text to the throbbing full-group unisons colored by traditional central Asian dance motifs, worked quite well. The progressions were aided in part by the shifts of fractal white lights to the smoky atmospheres of yellow and red gels.

The energy was high as everyone gestured with pulsing arms to the ceiling and to the floor. The ferocious rhythmic stomping and body percussion was impressive all around, though some dancers beamed while others were less confident in outward expression—a dichotomy that seemed to fall along cultural lines.

Basaran and Dorfman themselves danced in “Unsettled.” Basaran looked as if he had ropes attached to his arms: with each port-de-bras he tangled them in front of his tall body and was forced to wiggle through the spaces he’d created with his steps. Dorfman, at age 58, moved with the vibrancy of a much younger man, extending his limbs sharply to cut air in geometric chunks.

David Dorfman Dance’s BAM production culminates DanceMotion USA’s fourth season. The program has covered significant ground since its pilot season in 2010 where it sent eleven American dance companies to seven different world regions including Brazil, Mozambique, and Sri Lanka.

One brilliant facet of DanceMotion USA’s work is its elevation of the journey over the destination. The program’s prolific transparency of process, from its Youtube channel broadcasting the company’s travels and work abroad, to its livefeeds and broadcasts of rehearsals, artist talks, and performances, highlights the collaborative process. The Armenian hand game the dancers played during rehearsal, the traditional Turkish dance steps learned at a workshop, the daring improv exercises—the genuine moments of palpable cultural exchange are shared and preserved so their effects can be felt beyond the dancers and their immediate audiences. On the live Internet feed of an afternoon rehearsal on August 6th, Dorfman narrated to an audience tuned in behind laptop screens that they were about to see a few possible endings for the piece. With only two days of rehearsal left, Dorfman and Basaran were still deciding. The window into their unsettled state was most humanizing.

Government-sponsored culture is inherently suspect, and rightfully so. DanceMotion USA is no exception. It is not guilty of propaganda, the most common criticism of these programs, but rather, one questions its efficacy. Can dance diplomacy heal a hundred years of hatred? Can a contemporary dance collaboration soothe the lingering wounds of an ancient genocide? Of course not. Posed this way, the questions trivialize the century-old crime against humanity of the Armenian slaughter at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. But cultural diplomacy’s secret weapon is attraction, which is naturally more effective against divisions rooted in emotion than political diplomacy’s horsemen of persuasion or influence. People-to-people exchanges humanize, while politician-to-politician exchanges frustrate the hell out of people. At the nation-state level, Turkey, Armenia, and the U.S. become concepts rather than lands of individuals. Dance diplomacy not only pokes through the barriers obscuring the cultural “other,” but it dives into them, rolls on the ground, and supports them in a weight share on its back. It can’t choreograph a cure for the past, but it can offer steps toward a peaceful future.

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