

The Soft Steps of Diplomacy

By ROSLYN SULCAS

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Grahamstown, South Africa



Paul Smith for The New York Times
The Urban Bush Women — led by
Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, center — during
a workshop in Cali, Colombia.



Steve Lang
Ronald K. Brown of the Evidence
Dance Company in Brooklyn leads
children with the Sakhuluntu company
in the Joza township of South Africa.
Mr. Brown's visit was sponsored by the
State Department.



U Kyi Saw
A Burmese instructor, right, takes
members of ODC/Dance through steps
in Yangon, Myanmar.

IN a municipal hall in the township of Joza, close to 100 children and teenagers stood looking apprehensively at Ronald K. Brown, the artistic director of the Evidence Dance Company of Brooklyn. As seven of the Evidence dancers gently organized the children into rough lines, another dancer, Joel Sulé Adams, beat out a rhythm on drums while Mr. Brown started to swing his arms in simple circles.

The children, many of whom spoke little English, followed intently, losing their initial shyness as the music took hold. As Mr. Brown slowly built more complex rhythmic sequences, they began to smile and infuse the dance with some of the energy and joy they had shown in their earlier display of traditional Xhosa dance. Afterward they sat on rows of chairs before Mr. Brown and raised their hands eagerly, bombarding him with questions. “How did you all come together?” “How does it feel to be in South Africa?” “What do you call your kind of dance?” “How can we learn more dance like this?”

It was Day 1 of the company's visit to South Africa for a State Department-sponsored tour, the first major dance initiative of this kind in more than 20 years. Along with two other dance companies from the United States, ODC/Dance (which went to Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand) and Urban Bush Women (which is touring Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela), Evidence was a newly official instrument of cultural exchange. As such, during its monthlong tour — which also included stops in Senegal and Nigeria — it would discover both the exhilarating potential and sobering limitations of such a role.

Joza, the township the company was visiting, is a 10-minute drive and a world away from Grahamstown, where the company was staying in a comfortable guesthouse. Home to South Africa's most prestigious annual arts festival and one of the country's top universities, Grahamstown — with its wide, tree-lined streets, restaurants and cultural facilities — stands in vivid contrast to the sprawl of dry, dusty roads and simple houses and shacks of Joza.

That day the Evidence company ate a lunch of tripe stew, soya mince in tomato sauce and stiff cornmeal porridge in one of those houses: a government-issued, one-room concrete structure with a toilet but no separate wash facilities. Containing only a bed, some rickety shelves and two large drums, it is home to Vuyo Booi, a slight man with a broad grin who is the founder of Sakhuluntu, an informal community arts group that he started in 1998 with a handful of children. It is also an unlikely cultural oasis in Joza, a place where around 45 children take free weekday music, dance, drama and literature classes taught by Mr. Booi, Merran Marr (who runs Sakhuluntu with him) and a handful of teenage volunteers.

As an effort to reach nontraditional audiences in countries that might not have entirely favorable ideas about the United States, DanceMotion USA, as the State Department project is called, was making headway with the Joza students in the morning workshop, which included Mr. Brown's follow-the-leader dance routine, a question-and-answer session and rapturous applause after the company showed an excerpt from one of Mr. Brown's works.

But the afternoon discussion — officially titled “Basic Skills for Managing an Arts Company” — revealed that breaching fundamental cultural and social differences is not just a matter of good intentions and good will.

“How should we deal with the lack of interest from parents who are alcoholic or drug addicts?” Mr. Booi asked. “How do you keep the children away from friends who will influence them to use drink and drugs? How do we keep these young people, who get no pay, motivated?”

Mr. Brown did his best, responding with anecdotes from his own life and youth in Brooklyn and speaking of issues in his own community. But in a place where children grow up with little access to playgrounds, parks or cultural stimulation, the chasm still gaped.

Mr. Booi spoke animatedly and with some bitterness about the hopelessness of township life for its children. “Black people in townships don't have dreams,” he said. “The children are not encouraged to hope for the future.” The Xhosa-speaking teenagers, mostly less at ease in English, looked down shyly, reluctant to talk about themselves or their feelings in the presence of their elders.

After the two-hour meeting Ms. Marr said, slightly wistfully, that perhaps just sitting in a room with American dancers was motivation in itself for the young people. “Even if their problems can't be solved by a talk like this, it connects them to something bigger,” she said.

The township, with its crowds of people, dust-baked roads and bare-bones houses, sits in the midst of the starkly beautiful, mountainous landscape that characterizes the Eastern Cape. Filing out of the Joza library hall into the hot, dry afternoon, the American dancers looked somber and a little overwhelmed.

“I think maybe we were more amazed by them than they by us,” Francine Ott of Evidence said the next morning. “I'm in awe of the mind-set of those teenagers who volunteer with Sakhuluntu, how they understood what was important. We have so many luxuries and distractions in America. Here there is nothing to cover up difficulties. It is what it is.”

The State Department has had a cultural-exchange program in effect for the past 60 years, but dance hadn't played a major role since the better-financed days of the mid-1980s. “We have music, visual arts and film, but we didn't have a dance program, which seemed like a glaring omission,” said Maura Pally, the acting assistant secretary at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. “Then we got a large chunk of money to do an ongoing dance program. We haven't done this scale and scope before.”

The large chunk was \$1 million, awarded to the bureau in 2008 specifically for this program at the end of the Bush administration. The budget for culture at the bureau has been steadily increasing since 2001, Ms. Pally said, with a large jump from \$8.5 million in 2008 to \$11.5 million in 2009. The bureau plans to maintain the program, eventually opening it to all types of dance.

“Both the secretary and the president have spoken about the power of the arts to connect people in a unique way,” Ms. Pally said. “I think they both view this type of tool as an important tool in our foreign-diplomacy tool chest.”

Because more than \$1 million was needed for the three-pronged DanceMotion USA initiative, an extra \$370,000 was raised by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which was selected from a number of competing organizations to produce the tour, select its companies and plan its activities.

Joseph V. Melillo, the executive producer of the Brooklyn Academy, traveled to each country chosen by the State Department, countries that Ms. Pally said were selected partly because of “policy priorities” but also because of practical considerations. “There has to be the infrastructure for a dance presentation, and staffing at the embassy that can help support it,” she said.

(Interestingly, one of those choices was Senegal, a former French colony that still benefits — as do most Francophone African countries — from French cultural intervention. In that soft diplomacy race, the United States still lags behind.)

Mr. Melillo said that he had clear criteria when choosing the companies.

“I knew I needed a formalism and a certain kind of elegance and smartness in Southeast Asia,” he said. “I knew that I wanted to find an African-American modern dance company for Africa in order to demonstrate sensitivity to African traditions but also show advancements into contemporary sensibilities. South America is a very physical continent, even though it's all these different nations, and Brazil is not Colombia and Colombia is not Venezuela. They have a similar physicality, and I knew they would respect

the athleticism, strength and energy of Urban Bush Women.”

How well such endeavors work is difficult to quantify. There is no doubt that the hundreds of schoolchildren watching Evidence perform on their final day in Grahamstown were wildly enthused by the dancing and by the company members, who smilingly answered yet more questions at the end of the show. In Senegal, Mr. Brown said, there was more give and take; students in his classes and workshops were constantly showing him their own steps and dances.

“They organized a sabar party for us,” Mr. Brown said, explaining that sabar is a Senegalese dance that he frequently uses in his choreography. “What I realized is that you have an idea how they dance, but you don’t really know,” he said. “The young people create new dances, and they’ve invented one called ‘Obama,’ which we learned.”

How much the artists gain from their exposure to these cultures seems as significant as how much they give.

“When Americans think about Colombia, they think about drug cartels and kidnappings,” said Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the artistic director of the Brooklyn group Urban Bush Women, speaking from Cali, in western Colombia, on the second leg of the company’s South American tour. (The Urban Bush Women will be the last troupe to return, on March 30.)

“It’s an amazing dancing culture, and it’s been a revelation to see how dancing and singing and music are part of daily life,” Ms. Zollar said. “And there is a tradition here of welcoming and hosting people that we could do better with in the U.S. On a one-to-one level, you learn so much more about the breadth and depth of these cultures.

“America has lost a lot of ground internationally. The ideas that other countries have about our culture are mass-produced by television. This is an opportunity to communicate in a more complex way.”

No one from any of the tours reported any anti-American sentiment, although the members of ODC/Dance, from San Francisco, experienced some anxiety in Myanmar about whether a concert would be allowed.

“We never felt threatened,” said Brenda Way, the artistic director of ODC/Dance. “There was just a lot of anxiety about whether we had the right permits and so on. The political control is actually very subtle. Our students were profoundly curious and somewhat apprehensive. It was profound to experience a need for artistic expression at that level, and really moving to me. It felt fantastic that the young people were seeing our young people and that would be the image that they carried: This is what America is like.”

How these impressions and encounters translate to broader social and political effect is hard to evaluate.

“Measuring long-term impact is the holy grail of all public sector programs,” said Adrian Ellis, executive director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, the partner organization for the Rhythm Road, a State Department music program that has, since 2005, taken American roots music to more than 90 countries. “How do you measure the impact of a concert in Sierra Leone? It’s the chance encounters that may trigger something 10 years later.”

In Grahamstown the American dancers spoke with some passion about how the trip had affected them, even changed their lives. (“I’m going to stop complaining about the things that don’t matter,” Mr. Adams said after returning from Joza.) And Mr. Brown, speaking to his excited young audience at a free performance in Grahamstown, made a simple and convincing case for DanceMotion.

“We need to move together, to walk together,” he said. “All countries have their wars. We kill people for cellphones, for sneakers, in Brooklyn, in Miami, in South Africa. Dance is for peace.”

Julie Bloom contributed reporting.

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