

Contemplating the Contemporary breezes: Constructing cross-cultural communications in dance

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In a day and age when Google and YouTube- the presiding deities and the incarnations of knowledge- rule the world, Eric John Campros, a down to earth globe trotter with his heart and mind in the right place, discovers and nurtures spaces within and outside his beautiful mind, which encourage artists to discover their voices. A highly accomplished performer, choreographer, teacher, who taught and mentored thousands of students all over the world was visiting India recently as a mentor for India Dance Intensive 2017, an initiative driven by Broadway Dance Center, New York.



His tryst with close to three-decade long dance career began with his participation in a musical "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" as a thirteen-year old in Paso Robles, California. His passion for dance was duly fostered by his artistic yet a strict disciplinarian mother, and he scaled the heights of an illustrious and well-rounded dance career. While his baby steps in ballet were nurtured by legendary teachers such as Pat Jackson and Leslie Baumberger, his fulltime scholarship to STEPS Ballet school in New York opened up a universe of opportunities for him to learn and grow as an artiste. Undoubtedly, this was one of the proudest moments of his career. Armed with a bachelor's degree in Marketing from Missouri State University and a steely resolve to knock off any kind of negativity and to not let anyone else define him, he went on to negotiate and find opportunities in the rocky landscapes of the dancing world as a performer, choreographer and a teacher.

Currently Eric holds a highly coveted faculty position at Broadway Dance Center New York and is the Youth Artistic Director for the Brooklyn Dance Festival. His tremendous passion to reach out to anything and everything related to movement is the fuel which affords him the energy required for his strenuous trips around the world with his Dance Intensives- where he spends time in doing his most favorite job- to teach and mentor youngsters, to encourage them to be kind, open and vulnerable and to explore the possibility. It is his mission to create a safe space for exploration where mistakes are encouraged, allowing artists to realize their worth, their voice and their possibility.

In conversation with him, I discovered a humble human being who refuses to let mediocrity and arrogance cloud his sharp focus on growth - his growth and his students' growth. Humility and being human - these are the values he places in high regard. Although performed extensively, he has very little interest in seeking the limelight. As an artiste and a passionate mentor, he chooses to invite his students to discover their artistry and pushes them gently to grow into a sensible artist.

On Art and artistic integrity

For Eric it all boils down to the basic question of who we really are at the core. "A dancer's life is no different from anyone else's life minus the luxury of certainty. That is a given for any show business and at the end of the day if we can answer the question of who we really are in a satisfactory manner to ourselves, I think we are on the right track. Living in New York City gives me access to every possible artistic work - ranging from beautiful and inspiring to terrible and shocking. But that is what is cool about art. I appreciate that something went from zero to somewhere even if I don't particularly care for it. I personally have little care or respect for the work when it is overly sexual and its only purpose is to shock. I think a lot of it happens not for the purpose of being artistic but for funding. But then who are you as an artist? When the artistic integrity is compromised, there is no meaning in being an artist."

First teachers

"I have always had a belief in God or a higher power or whatever you would like to call it and I believe that's what carried me. And as cliched as it may be, my mother was always a voice of positivity. She instilled in me that I could be and do anything as long as I worked hard and never gave up. I was extremely lucky in having wonderful teachers all through my learning phase, which still continues. Pat Jackson, the most amazing and kind human being and a wonderful artist gave me a home at the studio and a full scholarship. Leslie Baumberger was instrumental in my pursuing dance because she was very hard on me and that made me want to dance even more."

Role of Broadway Dance Center

"It is the most famous and most successful commercial Dance Training School in the world. The studio provides an international platform and exposure for those on staff and that is one of the primary reasons it is so popular. We earned our place there, meaning we have all had and continue to have extremely successful careers. We bring our individual experiences and success to our classes there which we then pass on and move forward with our students, which then in turn ups the profile of the studio. It is all mutually beneficial!

Broadway Dance Center gives scholarships all over the world as a way to create possibility for dancers to train. It's really beneficial in both ways because it advertises for them but it also gives substantial discounts for students who are looking to train in New York City with some of the most successful choreographers and instructors in the industry. The wonderful opportunities for dancers at places like Broadway Dance Center are that they can pick and choose who they study with and get bits and pieces of many forms of dance. Depending on what one wants to do I think that's fine as long as they are aware that there is much to be learned.

My visits to India inspire me because the dancers in India are willing to make mistakes and so willing to be raw and open. I take that back with me as a fruitful experience. I visited India four times so far and I am definitely planning on visiting next year again."

History and nature of Contemporary

"Contemporary means pretty much just what is now! While modern dance is more influenced by ballet generally speaking, contemporary has more diverse influences from African to Hip Hop to Tap Dancing to Salsa and Merengue etc. Contemporary movement tends to be free by nature and it's actually quite difficult to put it into a box, which is why I love it so much and why I appreciate what artists continually create and evolve within it!

Then there are other dance styles like Modern, Hip Hop, Jazz. There are various explanations for each but most of them are derivatives of ballet. Hip Hop is rooted in tribal African movement, which then in the 60s and 70s evolved in black neighborhoods of America and continues to evolve today."

Contemporary scene in India

In times when every metro of India is buzzing with workshops on contemporary Hip Hop, Salsa and Belly Dancing, the question remains as to the quality and authenticity of such work and teaching, given the fact that India's exposure to western dance is far less than the Indian dance forms.

"My perception is that the Contemporary scene in India is growing. It is not nearly as popular as Hip Hop or Jazz Funk and it does not garner the respect that it deserves at this point. But it's simply because there isn't much access and I understand that! My contemporary style is rooted in clean ballet technique. These techniques are not widely taught in India at this time, and it can be challenging for some students in my classes to pick up certain elements of my style. But that is the joy of teaching; finding 50 different ways to explain the same thing. I think people look at contemporary as more challenging because it's a technique based discipline whereas the other stuff they see in videos and on TV is more accessible. My primary goal in these workshops is to ensure that every dancer leaves feeling that their artistic voice has been heard, and their possibility discovered."

Globe trotter on effects of globalization

His work as a performer, choreographer and teacher has taken Eric close to a hundred countries. Although dance consumes him for the most part, his interest in the contemporary issues - which include political as well as social - allows him to compare and contemplate on various factors affecting the dance culture globally. He observes how the cross-country flows of information, ideas, technologies and services affect the cultural scenes. Coming from Generation X, he understands the value of struggling for every bit that he gained for himself and takes pride in such meaningful accumulation of dance experience. "I work so hard at everything. I am in my forties now and I still go to class and I'm still hungry and I'm still curious and I still work every day to be better. There's still so much for me to learn! So, when there are other artists in my proximity that don't seem to have the same drive I get very frustrated. In particular when they have a modicum of success!"

Driven by mass media, internet and improved communication systems around the world, the Generation Z or iGeneration is having an easy access to everything and the impact is both positive and negative. Eric had, for example, dancers who have had very minimal training, walk into the studio with requests to teach dance choreographies that they watched on YouTube or television reality shows, without realizing the amount of training that is required to get to that point and even worse, sometimes with dance videos and material which are totally inappropriate for the age of the student. "I am happy that dance reality shows have brought dance into the everyday life of people but I believe they show a false representation. They are television shows so they're more interested in backstory and creating drama than the actual talent. And in order to make it big or be successful in this arena, the artists propel themselves into spaces which then result in neglecting the art itself and its very purpose! "



Career opportunities in dancing

Unpretentious and straight forward with his analysis, Eric says, "Dance is joy and dance is for joy but dance as a career requires a lot of commitment and hard work. It is not a stable or practical or typical life. I understand most parents want their kids to be successful in a financial way so they have stability etc. but that tends to negate the happiness one feels when they fall in love with this and continue to actually do it.

It is an absolutely tough life which is why I think I am an exception. It's not that I'm an exceptional talent, it's that I am an exceptional hard worker who doesn't take no for an answer. The joys I get from what I do far surpass everything else and I am more than content with that.

Build your success step by step with hard work, intelligence, love and care. Extensive training is imperative no matter what you want to do with your dance. Look for opportunities to grow with in the dance realm by learning diverse forms. Success comes to those who stick to the two elements which are the fundamental human values; integrity and sincerity towards work. The heady mix of these will stand one in good stead in any field and particularly in artistic avenues. There will always be good and bad days but as long as you choose a path with these two elements built in seamlessly, the going gets easier. Artistic life is inherently riddled with many uncertainties and unless it is based on solid training and anticipation, even winning the daily bread can become problematic. I was not willing to settle for a mediocre life, but I was willing to go that one extra step and work hard to have the life I wanted and that is what kept me on track all through.

On teaching and mentoring spaces

Eric is a tough, strong, well experienced and passionate educator. If dance is his greatest love, teaching and mentoring students is something that he takes as a very serious responsibility.

"My sense of self is rooted in how good I am as a human, and then how good am I in training people to have careers as I have, as my teachers have trained me. Because of the overflowing information these days, good and bad, youngsters are exposed to everything a bit too soon and a bit



too much. Easy access to everything including unbelievably unhealthy material on the internet, easy success, and quick fame - in such a scenario, it is easy for even an adult to lose balance and it is all the more so for youngsters. A modicum of success is prompting youngsters to abandon the basic discipline, hard work and sincerity towards the work which got them that little success. When the limelight wears out, the youngsters are lost and are being pushed into depression.

The integrity of an artist is in making sure to fill the gaps there and mentor the younger generation of artists to not just be creative but also strong, positive and sensible individuals who care about the human life and values. It is not just the choreographed piece that I want dancers from my class to take back with them but many more things that shape their lives to be meaningful, artistically productive and the confidence to take their life head on with integrity and professionalism. Dance feels good but it is also work! One should work at it, be good at it, keep at it to be successful! Both teachers and the students should be willing to grow continually because the minute they think that they have learnt enough, the moment the complacency sets in, it is all over!"

Ultimately, the dancer is the one with whom the proverbial buck stops! At the end of the month, he or she needs to pay the bills and build the career with love, care, integrity and intelligence.

On Master Classes and being a student forever

"I think anyone who calls himself/herself a master teacher, no matter how good they are, is pretty arrogant. Some of the workshops I do will be called master classes because that's the business but I would never define myself that way. At the end of the day I'm an artist who is more interested in growth than in grandstanding. And those are the kind of artists I respect. Arrogance, conceitedness and being in proximity to talent; these things do not make you talented, they just make you loud and obnoxious."

Parting thoughts

After meeting this highly-driven, passionate, human first-artist later individual, my Bharatanatyam trained mind could not help but remember the octogenarian, one of India's first male dancers of Bharatanatyam, who managed brickbats and accolades with the same élan, a highly revered teacher - Professor C.V. Chandrasekhar - who refuses to call himself, even at the age of 83 as a "dancer" and says "I am a dance student forever." For him, calling himself a dancer is arrogance! Perhaps, the mental spaces of mature artists whether they are from Brooklyn, New York or Chennai, Tamil Nadu will always vibrate with and function close to nature and remain humble in their aspirations and pursuits and attitudes towards learning.

Utilizing the open invitations from such mentors and the dance training centers to initiate a cross cultural communication and to usher a fruitful marriage of powerful body language of contemporary dance to the subtle and nuanced expressions of Indian classical dance by artists with integrity may open up wonderful works of dance artistry for future generations.

Career highlights

- * Tours with pop artists Aaliyah, The Backstreet Boys, Usher, Lil' Kim, Mikaela and Britney Spears
- * Appearances on Music Awards, Films, TV serials and theater
- * As a choreographer, his work was commissioned across the U.S., Germany, China, Japan and Canada.
- * Nominated for The Golden Dragon Award (equivalent to American Emmy Award) for his choreographic work with CCTV in China
- * Teaching at Yale, Sacred Heart University, Westborough College, Princeton etc. Created dance based curriculum for two prestigious universities in China along with Professor Lynne Mariani.

Dr. Sujatha Maringanti is a scientist and a lawyer based in Hyderabad. She has a certificate in Bharatanatyam from Bhaktha Ramadas College for Music and Dance in Hyderabad. She runs a voluntary organization called Art Can Happen Anywhere (ACHA) through which she organizes sessions on theater and art in general and works with school children to connect with the youngsters.