Troupes Discover Their ‘Collective Strength’

By: Roslyn Sulcas

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When you first started meeting online, a lot that was still unknown about Covid-19. What were your precautions then?

George Floyd’s death and the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement happened when your organizations were closed and dancers scattered. What were your conversations about them?

What were your thoughts about streaming performances? Did any of you have reservations about putting out free content, or discuss how to monetize it?

Would I say there was a feeling of weight on us to come up with a strategy for digital content as a tone when we were still a bit in shock at the magnitude of our situation. Eventually we came to understand that it was only the medium for the foreseeable future we could rely upon.

WELAHAN. It was crystal clear to us that we had no choice, and we discussed it a lot. At City Ballet, we were extremely lucky that for nearly a decade we had been capturing ballets on film each year for the purposes of marketing purposes. But we also knew we needed to change things and find ways to film our dancers in current time.

We do hope to keep some form of streaming and digital creativity alive, we know how important this year has been for developing and building a larger global reach for City Ballet.

Johnson. Digital was definitely a shift from the live performance focus of our normal lives. I think for this group, it wasn’t about monetizing content, it was about how to keep the dancers dancing, strong, beautiful, and challenged throughout being in the matrix.

There was a moment when were all having endless conversations in other places about budgets and parrol, and I thought, wait, we are artists. That’s what we should be doing forward.

What do you think about streaming performances? Did any of you have reservations about putting free content online, or discuss how to monetize it?

Johnson. Yes, we can’t take it for granted that this work is possible. You think things will go on forever, and this made us realize that sometimes they don’t, or can’t. We can now measure the sheer joy of doing this work and creating something magical and beautiful.

WELAHAN. There has perhaps been a loss of innocence. The wonderful thing about being a dancer is creating that magic of the realities we have to face. The pandemic made clear how what we can do, what can be lost. I’m not sure you can just sweat things back on and everyone is suddenly fine.

With our group, it feels like a hardened shell has been cracked off our organizations, and a new flexibility and energy has emerged. All through the pandemic we have been addressing the culture of ballet — so many dusty, old habits and outdated traditions that were holding us back. Bad habits and unhealthy power dynamics that have been built into the system and passed down generationally hadn’t been effectively addressed until recently.

We continue to have deep work to do, but over this time we’ve made progress. Most important, we’ve made that commitment to each other, that nothing can come in between and lead our art form forward — together.

VILARO. The gift of this group was the alliance that developed between us and will help to create change in our field. We have broken silos that were hierarchical structures from the past. We don’t hold information, we share.

How do you plan to go on meeting?

Johnson. Of course. It’s so fun. We do it on Fridays and talk about cocktails.

WELAHAN. Have you met in person yet with cocktails?

Johnson. It’s been a year. We really need those cocktails.

Leaders of New York’s top dance companies share ideas in an online support group.

By: ROSELYN SULCAS

Last summer, Jonathan Stafford, the artistic director of New York City Ballet, was feeling isolated and anxious. It was a few months into the pandemic, and the strangeness of lockdown and the turmoil and uncertainty of the Black Lives Matter movement were on his mind.

City Ballet’s performances, programs and plans had come to an abrupt halt, as was the case for performing arts organizations across the country. No one knew how or when or how theaters would open again.

Many dancers had fled to join family or friends outside the city; most didn’t have adequate space to keep up the intense physical training needed to keep in shape for performances.

A dance company’s artistic director nurtures dancers, conceives and plans seasons and tours, and keeps in close touch with every department from fundraising and marketing to costume making. What was the role of an artistic director now?

Stafford called Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, to chat. “This is great,” Battle said after they had spoken for a while. “I wish we were talking to other artistic directors.”

Battle called Eduardo Vilaro of Ballet Hispanico. Stafford and Wendy Whelan, the associate director at City Ballet, called Virginia Johnson of Dance Theater of Harlem and Kevin McKenzie of American Ballet Theater. On Aug. 8, 2020, the directors of five of New York’s most prominent dance companies had their first online meeting, and they have continued to get together almost every Friday since.

Newly close colleagues and friends, they have shared ideas, problems, strategies and solutions, and for the first time will present a series of performances together — the BAAND Together Dance Festival, free shows beginning on Tuesday in Lincoln Center’s outdoor stage in Damrosch Park.

“It was a light at the end of our tunnel,” Johnson said during a recent video interview with the other directors. “It’s not a marketing initiative. It’s something real that came from the time we spent together, and wanting to give back to the city.”

In a wide-ranging discussion, punctuated by laughter and a bit of teasing, the directors talked about their pandemic concerns and the Black Lives Matter movement, and how they think the dance world has changed. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation and follow-up emails.