

## Livia Drapkin Vanaver Acceptance Speech

My parents were very interested in the arts. My father took me to every Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. As my mother said, in a letter she wrote to me the night before she died, "I nurtured your every artistic impulse." I even remember her getting up with me for a period of time at 2 o'clock in the morning and sitting with me in the living room while I played piano. After I was done, she would make me a cup of hot cocoa and put me back to bed. Each month our family and another family in the neighborhood went out to a different ethnic restaurant in NYC. This left a huge impression on me. It was in this way as well, that I developed a rich appetite (no pun intended) for world traditions. My mother was a poet, a lover of the arts and a great influence on me. She encouraged me to become a non-conformist (she never even let me join Brownies or the Girl Scouts) and to find my own way through the arts whether it was painting, piano or dance.

My inspiration for the format of our World Dance & Music residency came from my elementary school experience at PS 173 Fresh Meadows, Queens. Annually, every class gleefully prepared for the May Dance Festival. Each teacher chose a country of focus and the entire classroom became that country. The rooms were decorated with national crafts, student reports, drawings, and tourist posters. Parents helped to make costumes and the classroom was often filled with the aroma of ethnic food from that country. In phys ed we learned many recreational folk dances. Here we prepared our regional dances to share with each other. I remember marching out onto the asphalt schoolyard with my paper bag filled with a stack of newspapers and stapled together. These were our "cushions". We sat in double lines like spokes of a wheel, emanating from the center where one by one each class performed their national dance. The highly awaited finale was always the 6th graders weaving their brightly colored ribbons and dancing around the maypole. Interestingly enough, this was the strong image and ingrained experience that inspired the Calico Ball I created in Beacon almost 20 years ago and the template we continue to use for our arts in education World Dance Festivals in Schools program.

What better way to introduce children to the undeniable fact that WE ARE A GLOBAL COMMUNITY and that they are indeed part of it, no matter where they live. Through learning the dances of a country or region of the globe, the lore and legacy of the world unfolds and becomes real, tangible and alive in oneself. I fondly call this an "in body experience"! There is history, the very fabric of a culture deeply embedded in the movements, rhythms, stylistic nuances and purpose of a cultural dance. And what's more, there a sense of joy and celebration engendered when the dance is executed.

"Why do people dance? " This is the leading, essential question that becomes a delicious inroad into the minds of the children we teach. Immediately, hands fly up. The enthusiasm and curiosity begins. People dance to have fun, for exercise, to celebrate (weddings, birthdays, a right of passage, a good harvest, holidays... both secular and religious). In some cultures people dance at funerals. People dance to express themselves, to let off steam, to express music, for entertainment, to earn a living, to compete, to tell stories, before and after a hunt, before and after going into battle. The answers come from the children. Their answers elicit more questions. We then use these questions as a springboard to begin very naturally learning some movement. Having collected dances all over the world for the past 37 years, we have a repertoire of close to 200 dances at our fingertips. Impromptu responses from our Teaching Artists energize the process of discovering how dance has been such an integral part of societies worldwide.

We might teach a few movements of an ancient hula and talk about the role and history of the hula dancer in society in Hawaii when we illustrate a dance that tells a story. A few steps of the

South African Gumbo dance might demonstrate how a dance arose out of a need for people to express themselves and preserve the rhythms of their drumming and culture, which had been suppressed. The conversation peppered with a variety of movements becomes vibrant and alive.

By teaching in an inquiry-based method, our first workshop unfolds. Often we don't even begin teaching the actual dance that the class will be focusing upon that first class, but rather have a discussion, whetting the appetite of even the most reluctant child who perhaps has been taught that "dancing is only for girls." Although dance nowadays is much more accepted for all genders, the image that children have in the USA of what exactly constitutes DANCE, is imparted to a great extent by TV and media. "When are we going to learn our dance?" they say eagerly. That is the next question.

Our residency actually is preceded with one or several planning sessions with the classroom teachers and The Vanaver Caravan Teaching Artists. We discuss our goals and outcomes for the project and what the "learning" will be, aside from producing a fabulous festival for the school and parent community. We then schedule our classes each day, each session lasting between 45-60 minutes. Any one of the Teaching Artists in the Caravan sees 4 classes per day and allows for ample time to meet with teachers to discuss the progress of or any situation with the group or individual students. We recommend ten contact sessions with each class but more often than not, we only get 4-6 sessions before we are on to our dress rehearsal and performance. When we work locally (in the Hudson Valley, NYC, or Capital District Region) we can have a long-term residency spanning two weeks to two months.

On tour, we have to complete the work in one week's time (4 days for the process of learning and rehearsing the dances and the final day for a dress rehearsal and culminating performance). During the first session the students learn the basic steps of any given dance as well as the background and context for the dance itself. The second and third classes are devoted to fleshing out the choreography and setting the dances for performance. The 4th session includes entrances and exits and putting it all together. If we are allotted more sessions, we can go deeper exploring and developing each dance. Polishing a dance and a performance is a pleasure and an art itself. The whole notion of fine-tuning a dance or an aspect of the art of performing, of employing further techniques for self-expression and details, add to the fullness of the residency and certainly to the in-depth learning capacity that this kind of work offers. The final day we hold a dress rehearsal in the actual performance space, and then share our dances with the rest of the school and again in the evening for the parents and community. The school districts with which we work in New York State and have conducted residencies for many years look forward to the "new crop" of students and the new sharing each year, as does the entire community. The success of the project creates its sustainability.

Often it is the most disruptive child that excels and becomes a leader of the dances we teach. This child may not be able to sit still at their desk and pay attention in that way, but their learning modality is right here in their own body. The body is the key to cultivating exquisite attention. It's magnificent to see the relationship between teachers and individual students shift and also to observe the change in attitude and image amongst the students themselves, within the class, when they excel in their physical expression through dance and become shining stars.

There are little epiphanies every day, as the children discover the power and delight of dance for themselves.

We strive to make learning the dances fun, all the while teaching the students dance vocabulary and the fundamental basics of dance, especially if they have had no previous dance background. They learn how to run, hop, skip, jump and leap. They learn how to carry themselves, how to

isolate their movements, hold hands together and work cooperatively as a group, dance in unison, improvise solos, learn how to learn long sequences of movement, learn to project and dance full out.

How proud they feel processing out into the gym, the theatre or a large open space, representing "their country". They have immersed themselves in a process of learning the movements and the origins and the place their dance holds in the particular chosen culture and now it is time to share with the community. The benefits of this project now multiply. The classes observe each other, each class performing a different dance from a variety of regions around the world. The festival culminates with a song with movements, often employing elements of sign language. In conclusion, when a school opens itself up to creating a world dance festival, the learning through the body and through cultural exploration is plentiful. The children become immediately a uniting of nations all in one place. They see the world before them in a profound and heartfelt way and feel themselves as part of a global community. The seeds for future dancers and dance audiences are also planted.

I want to thank the Association of Teaching Artists for this honor today.