

May we hug you?

Bringing the Dances of Universal Peace to the Ballet School of Portugal
November 2009

The real message of the Dance is to open up the vistas of life to all who have the urge to express beauty, with no other instrument than their own bodies, with no apparatus and no dependence upon anything but space... The Dance is at once the most satisfying and the most beautiful human activity.

The Dance is the living sculpture of ourselves.

Ruth St Denis in 'Wisdom comes Dancing (ed. Kamae A Miller, p. 20)



The young girls all flock around Ariënne. 'May we hug you?' Ariënne with her hair flowing down her shoulders, all the girls with their hair tied up at the neck, for at a Ballet School, the teachers must be able to see the neck.

We're at the Ginasio at Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal, where talented young dancers can learn classical and modern ballet in the morning and go to a regular school in the afternoon, thus combining the chores of every young adult with a passion for dance.

We are here to link modern and classical ballet as a performance art to spirituality. What a treat for us, to be dancing with these young people who are all enthused, completely in it and perfectly trained in using the body, responding to music and remembering choreographies. For them it is natural to make every movement as beautiful as possible, to respond to the rhythm and finish every step and turn.

Without realizing it, they are followers of Miss Ruth: they work from 'the sacredness of the body and the need to emphasize beauty and life' and we are here to fill in the third of the triad of Miss Ruth: 'the necessity to integrate the self'. (Wisdom comes Dancing, p. 2). Without being aware, they follow the dictum of the Qu'ran that God loves Beauty. We realize how much we can learn from their dedication to beauty. So who is teaching who?



The same is true for their singing: they all sing in pitch and with good, strong voices. Like Murshid SAM, they are not inhibited by the idea that spirituality is connected with whispering or singing softly. On the contrary: the mantras fill the dance hall with its superb acoustics.

After the last session, we thank the artistic director Marcello, Brazilian and every inch a ballet dancer, for his audacity to invite two people he didn't know to expose his school to a form of spiritual dancing he also didn't know. And of course Paula Moreno, who brought us here in Portugal through a mutually dear friend, as she so kindly wanted to combine her works as a dancer with the school, teaching modern improvisation. Though she too never dances, she managed to convince them and as a result we are invited to dinner. She tells us how she was torn between the dance and spirituality and how these two workshops made her realize her truth: 'I come from the Planet Dance. Whatever I do with spirituality will have to part of my life as a dancer.'



The set up and getting there was anything but ideal. Can you imagine being in silent for three days, leading a sesshin, and immediately after breaking the silence rushing off through London, subway and train to a frantic and buzzing airport, running with guitar and luggage and making your flight with only five minutes left over on the clock? Our trip to Porto/Vila Nova de Gaia (two cities on either side of the river) obviously was planned in a later stage. But it was

worth every minute of running, for never for us Ruth St Denis came alive as here. We feel as if the circle is complete and Miss Ruth comes back to the classroom though the inspiration she gave Murshid SAM, enabling her to see how completely accepted modern dance has become. We both think with gratitude of Kamae Amrapali Miller, who almost single-handedly put Miss Ruth on the agenda of the Dances of Universal Peace.



Yes, Miss Ruth. We only mentioned her the second day, as we decided to first introduce the dances and tell a little bit about ourselves and our own children. This actually was much easier than it seems on paper. After all, our house in Holland in the past was often crowded with young people in the same age. Our trump of course is that our daughter Brechje, now 23, in the past joined us on many Dance Camps in England, Germany and even Latvia for almost a decade and after that in her school days became a hip hop dancer.

Ariëne goes back in her memories and shares how much she, as a child, would have loved to go to the similar school in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, following her dream to become a dancer and how inspired she is now, her dream coming true, if only for a few days and in a different role. The whole class understands, having the same dream and at the same time realizing only few of them will actually feel the stage and smell the sweat, the heat and be inspired by the audience. Actually,

competition is a issue with the students, we later learn from Paula. This sets us off and later we work out a curriculum for working with these and other emotions, using the dances and linking them with everyday life and the dreams of these youths. Amazing how easy and well these Dances of Universal Peace can fit in.

Maybe one day, time and money allowing...

But let's go back to the classroom. We tell the boys and girls how great it is to have kids and also how great it is to see them leaving our home, giving us the freedom we need for traveling with the dances. It wasn't always the win – win situation we describe of course, but for the sake of the event it doesn't any harm to stretch the reality a bit and leave out the sacrifices and worries that inevitably are part of our semi-nomadic life as well. What stands is that our children both love and honor what we do and feel we raised them well.

Yes, we feel at home here in the Ginasiano. But how do we present the dances? We decide for some fire and go for the OM Nama Shivaya Dance, after which we present his son Ganesha. Then we sit down for 45 young people (two classes) teachers are giving classes and join us tomorrow. All want to for them that the dances are to archetypal emotions within tion that they later as ballerineed to know about the emostage. After that we do the Kamore meditative dancing and (the Australian one, all loved the Arabic scale), bringing it to the feeling of a zikr and the Sura of Love. After all, love and longing is what counts, also when you are 14 or 16 years old.



The next morning we have only one class, for the school must go on of course, but we have more teachers joining us. One of the boys comes back. He left his T-shirt ('If I were God, everyone would be dead!') at home and wears something more neutral now. We thought he'd come back, for the first morning he really was in it, after he let his image dissolve in the Shiva Dance.

As some are new, we again introduce the dances, now from the historical view, mentioning Inayat Khan and Ruth St Denis as grandparents and elaborating on the latter one. Interpreter Isabella (who – imagine the odds! – did part of her training in Holland and now is translating us Dutch people) translates:

'Ruth St De... Ruth WHO? Wow, Ruth St Denis!!!'



All are astound we know the teacher of their beloved Martha Graham and we are so happy to fill in some gaps. We talk about how Miss Ruth was quite a character and managed to put modern dance on the agenda in a time where there were only two ways of dancing: with a tutu or with as little clothes as possible (or none at all).

After that it's time for the dances. Again Shiva, but now the Nataraya Dance. They can handle a bit more choreography and spinning! Next the Introductory Bismillah. This austere dance with little choreography and music to it, goes down well and at the sharing later many talk about how deep and profound this dance has been for them. We close the first slot with the Jewish Wedding dance. It is great to have fun and stamp our feet. Murshid SAM would have loved it and so to the students.

For sharing we review the three dances we've done so far and ask the participants how they felt. We link their experience with their hoped for future on stage and continue with the more meditative Creation Kyrie,

Jamil Allah with it's demanding choreography to show them that meditation is great, but you have to keep alert. We close with the zikr of 19-year old John Stevens we recently learned from Pir Shabda. We warn them: there is something with the music of this 'Youngster Zikr', but it's up to them to find out what it is. I start to play and on the first repetition Ariënne starts dancing on the HU. All join and the dance is done follow-the-leader-style. No verbal explanation needed.

The last session is over. The girls all flock around Ariënne. 'May we hug you?'

Wali van der Zwan