

When Dance Shut Down, These Directors Banded Together

Since last summer, leaders of New York's pre-eminent dance companies have been meeting weekly to share ideas and problems.

By Roslyn Sulcas

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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 urgency of the Black Lives Matter protests were on his mind.

City Ballet's performances, programs and plans had come to an abrupt halt — as they had for performing arts organizations across the country. No one knew when or how theaters would open again. Many dancers had fled to 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 performance.

A dance company's artistic director nurtures dancers, conceives and plans seasons and tours, and keeps in close touch with every department from fund-raising 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. 7 last year, the six directors of some of New York's most prominent dance troupes 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 on 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.



"We asked ourselves, what's our goal for this group?" Stafford said. "How can we use our collective strength to create real change in the dance field as a whole?" Justin J Wee for The New York Times

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

KEVIN MCKENZIE Initially we were just trying to take the pulse: Is this as bad as I think it is? Each of us had plans that screeched to a halt, and we were all in a state of triage. We asked each other: How are you dealing with your artists? With directives from the Center for Disease Control? With reinventing the way we could perform?

JONATHAN STAFFORD Eduardo kept us organized; he would create agendas and give us homework. We realized early on that the purpose of talking was to engender action. We asked ourselves, what's our goal for this group? How can we use our collective strength to create real change in the dance field as a whole?

What were some of the strategies or approaches that came out of the meetings? How did they help you?

WENDY WHELAN Learning about how to create bubbles so that a group of dancers could work together in isolation and then perform. Kevin was doing a lot of that, because he is Mr. Kaatsbaan [McKenzie was a founder of the Kaatsbaan Cultural Park in upstate New York, in 1990], and we had no experience of it.

STAFFORD That kicked us in the butt a bit and we thought, OK, we have to make this happen. We have also talked a lot about testing and vaccinations. City Ballet is mandating vaccinations for our employees and it helped to have support from other dance companies and know that we weren't an outlier. There isn't going to be a unified policy here, but it was very helpful to share.

EDUARDO VILARO One specific thing was that we decided to band together around the election. We crafted a message about the importance of voting, and what the election meant for our community. It was the first time the five organizations have put something out together, and we refrained from using the word "turnout"!

VIRGINIA JOHNSON Of course the biggest concrete outcome is the BAAND Together festival. It was such fun to program together with other artistic directors; you're on an island usually with that task!

ROBERT BATTLE As much as specific outcomes, like the election policy or these performances, I feel like the meetings really helped by giving us a space where you could say, "I don't have the answers." That can be terrifying if you are the one who is supposed to know what to do. It was good to unburden that, and to discover that maybe you do have some answers if the right questions are asked.

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 then?

VILARO We understood that we were very different organizations and had to address these issues differently. But we were able to talk to each other openly, and that was really helpful in deciding on our own approaches.

STAFFORD We were asking one another, how do we talk about this? It wasn't about being of color or not, but about having the difficult conversations that we have never had before about becoming an inclusive art form. We need to do better: how are we going to do that?

JOHNSON We could be totally honest with each other. There were many conversations that were quite beautiful.

Did you differ in the way you responded to lockdown and the challenges it threw up for you and the dancers?

JOHNSON We are different kinds of institutions, and different sizes. I think Dance Theater of Harlem is the only nonunion company in this group, so it was interesting for me to hear how the unions were approaching things.

But there was a lot of common ground: We were all essentially in a situation where our income was wiped out, and had to ask ourselves, how do we keep our dancers motivated and in shape, our art going, how do we keep ourselves sane? It was helpful to gather different approaches, to hear what was possible.

ROBERT BATTLE When dancers are devastated, you, as the director, are somehow absorbing that. This kind of situation, when you are still psychologically trying to fly the plane, was a shared experience.

Let's be real: You can talk to other people in your organization, but there is nothing like sitting in that particular seat. These meetings allowed us to say, OK, we're a bit frightened, and gave us the space to breathe and do the work we needed to do. For me, the mental health part was so important: It was like therapy.

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

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

WENDY WHELAN 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 to excerpt for marketing purposes. But we also knew we needed to remain creative 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 outreach 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 online content. It was about how to keep the dancers dancing, strong, beautiful and challenged without being in the studio.

There was a moment when we were all having endless conversations in other places about budgets and payroll, and I thought, wait, we are artists. That's what has to drive us forward.

Has the dance landscape in New York and beyond been irrevocably changed by the pandemic?

MCKENZIE I would say we don't know yet. What we do know is that every organization is going to come back as a very different entity. Speaking for Ballet Theater, we have learned a lot about digital delivery and how important it will be. But the experience has also underscored the thirst and gratitude for live performance. So far, it's just been outside, we haven't gone back to being with strangers in the dark. We don't know how that will feel.

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.

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

WHELAN 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 importantly we've made that commitment to each other toward forging ahead and leading 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 hoard information, we share.

So you plan to go on meeting?

JOHNSON Of course. It's so fun.

WHELAN And we do it on Fridays and talk about cocktails.

Have you met in person yet with cocktails?

WHELAN Eduardo is working on it.

STAFFORD It's been a year. We really need those cocktails.

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