

"CREATIVE TIES"

**This article has been reproduced from Dance/USA Journal Vol. 18, Nos. 2-3
Fall, 2002**

***Editor's Note:** For dancers and choreographers who have a yen for all international experience, opportunities that tie in with teaching and freelance choreography projects offer intriguing possibilities. One experience seems to propitiously, lead to the next, as new friendships are made and new territory is explored. With artists working with artists across cultural boundaries, the results of the international exchange are among the most tangible. That is what this kind of engagement hopes to accomplish: new material, new discoveries, new aesthetics discovered by doing and experiencing, not simply watching. Teacher becomes the learner as a part of this process, and brings back as much as was offered. If Janis Brenner can find a way to bring her international colleagues Stateside, the circle of exchange will find a fitting expression.*

by JANIS BRENNER

I have been invited to write this article focusing on international collaboration and cultural exchange. Just as these areas can be fraught with complexities-artistic, political, religious, economic, linguistic, even logistic-so has been the path of my life as an artist. Perhaps this is why, as I've pondered the difficulty in setting a linear direction for this article, I have come to equate it with the circuitousness of a career that oftentimes appears as an unorchestrated free-flow. The invitation to write was prompted by the specific collaborative experiences I have had in Indonesia and Senegal in 2001. So, I am going to focus on these two rather profound excursions because they truly embrace the idea of "cultural exchange, "addressing questions that many people have put to me recently.

"How do you get these invitations, and where does the funding come from?" Each offer happens through unique channels, but in general, most offers come through other artists and educators who have taken my workshops or residencies, watched my repertory or have seen me or the company perform. This differs somewhat from the "corporate touring model," where a tour schedule is to perhaps more artificially constructed and is built by presenters and booking managers. As someone put it, "You are not just touring. You seem to be following your artistic spirit. And perhaps that is the key to the success or growth that you seem to find in what you are doing."

Saint Louis, Senegal, West Africa

The director, Julius Effenberger, originally from the Czech Republic who lives

in Zurich, Switzerland, saw me perform in Avignon, France, in the summer of 1996 in Meredith Monk's work *The Politics of Quiet*. He found me walking down the street the next day, took me to lunch, asked about my life and work, and I gave him a press packet. We were in touch a few times over the years.



Janis Brenner at a funeral ceremony in Bali, March 1, 2001. Photo: artist's collection.

Four years later, in 2000, knowing of my multidisciplinary aesthetics and teaching, he contacted me to see about my interest in starting a new work and a theatre arts academy with African performers in Senegal where he lives part time. Partially because of the environmental theme of the new work, UNESCO and the Swiss Embassy provided funds. The US Embassy in Dakar then joined in to specifically support my participation. Julius and I worked with nine artists that he had preselected. We were both interested in a holistic way of nurturing and directing young performers-as multifaceted dancers/singers/actors. The performers had to be versatile, open to interdisciplinary creative structures and improvisations as we evolved a "play" based on a Senegalese legend about a queen who lives in the sea and is dying from the pollution. She will not rise out of the water until it has been purified.

Java and Bali, Indonesia

In 1994, while a guest-artist-in-residence at UCLA, I taught and coached Javanese dancer Miroto, an MFA candidate, in technique and choreography classes. We established a deep, unspoken connection as artists with similar

sensibilities. Five years later, much to my surprise, he contacted UCLA from Indonesia to find out where I was, Miroto had proposed to the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI), where he is a faculty member, to bring me to Yogyakarta as the first American dancer/choreographer/teacher to work there. Having had a long history of working in Asia, I was thrilled at the prospect of working in collaboration with these artists. Their hope was that I would introduce my "contemporary" dance aesthetics in terms of technique, improvisation and composition as well as my approach to movement, voice and theatre integration and create new work on the Saraswati Dance Company of ISI, who were trained in traditional Indonesian dance. ISI could offer no salary and no airfare for a seven-week visit! After much doubt that this project would come to fruition, I applied for and received an American Artists Abroad program grant from the US State Department—a grant large enough to allow me to bring one of my main company dancers, Kun-Yang Lin (originally from Taiwan), to do duet concerts in Bali and Java (for two weeks) and my lighting designer, Mitchell Bogard - which turned out to be crucial in getting the concerts to happen at all.

"What made these two experiences so special?" I have been touring worldwide since 1977, when I was a member of the Murray Louis Dance Company. I have been honored to have performed and worked in many countries and have had profound artistic experiences with artists working in a variety of circumstances. That said, the experiences of Senegal and Indonesia were incomparable to any I had known before, in terms of both their artistic traditions and the spiritual, economic and day-to-day conditions that guide their lives. Before these trips, I had always worked with dancers from other countries who had trained in Western, contemporary dance techniques. I had created or set repertory in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Sweden, France, Germany and on "foreign" dancers throughout the United States. So, although there might occasionally be language barriers or differences in choreographic process, I took for granted that a basic movement vocabulary provided a foundation from which to work. In Java and Saint Louis, this was not the case at all. These two projects involved the creation of a new and culturally specific artistic language. It involved my own self-education in the culture so that I would not impose something alien on the performers, but rather give new material some topical significance. In such instances, I created works that were specifically about them, for them, and that embraced their situation as citizens of ever struggling nations with their own stunningly rich dance and music traditions. These works were not ones that could translate back onto my own company. They captured a particular frame of reference. For instance, in Yogyakarta, the dancers' experience with partnering, weight-sharing, learning complicated rhythmic patterns with the legs, or simply jumping off the floor was minimal, especially for the women who, in most styles of Javanese dance, never leave the ground, rarely raise their eyes, have a spatial sphere of about two feet in diameter and do not lift their legs at all. We spent much time in explanation of the mechanics of these new conventions, and since this was what they had brought me there to do, it was embraced

wholeheartedly (and with great humor, I might add). The first work we created, *The Last Ones*, thematically encompassed the tragedy of the ongoing, sometimes violent situation in Indonesia through an intense, bound, then abandoned movement style. The second work, *Common Ground*, dealt genially with gender role reversals, an honest synthesis of their dance styles with mine and the great humor and lightness of spirit that they are able to express in their performing personas. In Senegal, where the dance traditions are so rooted in rhythm, complicated dynamic shifts, virtuosic jumping and phenomena] spurts of energy release, I needed to employ nearly an opposite approach to teaching and the choreographic process. We worked very much through improvisation to come to a melding of forms and content. In both places, however, the reward of the process was manifested in the 100 percent investment and desire of these artists to learn, to digest, to synthesize my ideas and vocabulary and to reciprocate by allowing me to share in their traditions, history and lives. We trusted in each other and in the transcendent power of art.

"Does this work abroad impact on your work here?" On a personal and artistic level, yes, it certainly has. Working abroad has made me more of a risk-taker artistically, because I have had the opportunity to view art from so many other perspectives. It has solidified my life-long belief in the magnificent breadth and scope of "modern dance" -how it maintains the capacity to embrace and expand so many ideas and possibilities throughout the world's cultures. And on a personal note, it has caused me to examine and continue to question my political, religious and cultural assumptions, which in turn flow both subtly and overtly into my work and my person.

"Does this work abroad impact on the amount of work for your company?" What is continually challenging for me is the fact that I can be invited to work in a place like Indonesia or Senegal, but I am still waiting to get a booking for my company in New Jersey. In fact, when my company began touring as a full entity in 1990, the first booking we received was to Taiwan! I can hear some readers saying, "She should thank her lucky stars! A tour to Taiwan instead of New Jersey!" And I would agree, but the larger point is that my company, and therefore my work, has struggled to hold onto its very existence because of the apparent lack of interest from most of the major players-presenters and founders -- my own country, despite a strong track record and excellent press. And besides, we'd like to perform in New Jersey. The good news is that, after nine months of complicated arrangements and rearrangements, I am bringing my company to Java for the Indonesian Dance Festival in September 2002. We had been invited, but they again had no money. To this end, we have spent the year raising funds, hoping for some more funding from government sources and crossing our fingers that relations between our two countries remain relatively stable. In fact, last fall we received our first travel support grant from The Fund for US Artists at International Festivals. We also want to focus on the prospect of bringing the Saraswati Dance Company here to the United States, so that

audiences would have the privilege of seeing their traditional dances in conjunction with our newer contemporary pieces, revealing a true example of international collaboration and cultural exchange. So, despite obstacles (and I know we all have them in different areas), I try to encourage myself to find particular pathways to rewarding, spiritually nourishing work. I try to acknowledge what has worked for me in the past and what has not. And, however corny it may sound, I try to follow my bliss--or rather, make sure I remember to take my bliss with me as I carve out and continue on the circuitous paths.

Janis Brenner, an award-winning dancer/choreographer/ singer/teacher is artistic director of Janis Brenner & Dancers in New York City. She has toured in 27 countries and is recognized as a "singular performer" with a multifaceted artistic range. Brenner has received numerous honors, including a 1997 New York Dance and Performance Award (BESSIE) for her performance in Meredith Monk's work, a 1996 Lester Horton Award for Choreography in Los Angeles, a 1993 Leach Fellowship for Outstanding Achievement in the Performing Arts and a 1986 New York Dance on Camera Festival award. Her work has been commissioned or restaged on more than 30 companies and colleges in Europe, Asia, and the United States. She is a sought after teacher conducting workshops in technique, improv, composition, repertory and vocal work. She has also been performing with Meredith Monk and Vocal Ensemble since 1990 (recording on ECM Records) and has a debut CD with Theo Bleckmann, *Mars Cantata*, available from EARrelevant Music. Brenner has been co-choreographer for Michael Moschen (including PBS' Great Performances), a soloist with Annabelle Gamson's company ('84-'87) and with Murray Louis Dance Company ('77-'84) working with Rudolph Nureyev, Placido Domingo, Dave Brubeck Quartet, Joseph Papp, Batsheva Dance Company in Israel and A Alwin Nikolais. The company's ongoing project, *A Peace for Women*, premiered in September 2000 at Madison Square Garden during the "Celebration for Peace" concert in honor of the United Nations Millennium Summit Conference in New York.

This articles has been reproduced from Dance/USA Journal Vol. 18, Nos. 2-3