



Above: Creative Family Workshop. British Council photographer: Mr Yang Yong.

Unpacking ballet in Beijing

Jonathan Silverman and **Martha Ming Whitfield** describe a professional development initiative for Dance Artists with Royal Opera House Education in Beijing

This past summer a team from Royal Opera House Education headed to Beijing and Hong Kong with The Royal Ballet. Their assignment in Beijing was to provide professional development for a group of Chinese artists and educators as part of an ongoing partnership between the Royal Opera House (ROH) and the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA). The project was supported by the British Council, as part of its three-year initiative to improve community access to the arts and to support the development of 'Creative Cities' in China. It was delivered by: Pippa Cobbing, freelance dance educator; David Pickering, soloist and education facilitator for The Royal Ballet; and Jonathan Silverman, arts integration specialist; with Craig Edwards of The Royal Ballet's music staff.

We received 76 applications from a broad spectrum of artists and educators, of whom 26 were invited to participate in a five-day intensive professional development programme. This explored the use of the creative process in teaching dance, and looked at how to create inclusive learning

communities and structure repertory-based ballet activities.

For the purpose of this project we referred to all of the participants in the professional development intensive as 'teaching artists.' This term is more commonly used in the USA, but seemed the most inclusive for this particular group of artists and educators. 52% had a dance background, and 48% were non-dance professionals. Some were fluent in ballet technique; others were not. 76% of the participants were Beijing-based, with 24% coming from other provinces in Mainland China.

Our planning raised many questions: How could we help teaching artists integrate creativity into their existing practice? What strategies could we employ to bridge cultural differences? How could we honour both the rich tradition of ballet and the legacy of Chinese art? How would we help teaching artists redefine and broaden their definition of ballet education? How could we best communicate our ideas? Fortunately our interpreter was sensitive to cultural and vernacular nuances. We informed him of our lesson plans and he not only joyfully translated but also participated

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Above: Teaching artists working together. British Council photographer: Mr Yang Yong.

himself.

As part of the programme, the Teaching Artists actively observed and participated in ROH Education-led community workshops:

- A nine-hour workshop series for Young Advocates (a group of disabled and non-disabled young people participating in a leadership development programme designed to promote disability awareness and inclusion.)
- A Creative Families workshop for adults and children
- A workshop for teenagers from migrant worker families, and from families affected by the recent earthquake in Sichuan province.

These workshops with family and youth groups were intended to model how an approach to ballet education that is based on creative approaches rather than technique training can be adapted for a wide range of participant groups. As they observed and assisted the teaching, artists were encouraged to reflect on: how a workshop could be constructed with an overall aim and a progression of activities; how the leaders worked to create encouraging, safe environments for learning and creative risk-taking; and how direction can provide the structure necessary for creative interpretation on the part of workshop participants.

Teaching artists were asked to provide information about their work and goals. This initial survey revealed that they constituted a talented group. They were not only enthusiastic; they approached the workshop curious, (in their own words), to "teach more originality," "open up windows of thinking," and "break through fixed patterns."

There is tremendous respect for teachers in China; in fact, one of our challenges was to create a collegial environment with a less formal relationship between teacher and student. Our teaching artists sought to open up their curriculum, and were eager for new ideas on "how to teach dance to different groups of people and how to communicate with them." Most had been taught through a system that stressed conformity and technique rather than personal exploration and expression. Many had completed some

formal teacher education in China, and were accustomed to the idea of external evaluation but less comfortable with self-designed assessment. For the first time they were able to experience a critique process that honours artistic intent and is inclusive, informative, and instructive. Initially it was difficult to dispel the image of right and wrong or a prescriptive curriculum. We emphasised that our workshops were about experimentation and extending the parameters of ballet, rather than technique.

Our first challenge was to create a community built on trust and exploration. For each series of activities we moved from individual exploration and technique in warm-ups to small and large-group collaborative artistic problem solving. Our intent was for the teaching artists to observe the instructional strategies that led to a progression of complexity.

The concept of curriculum backward mapping (beginning the planning from long-term objectives and culminating experience) was new to our teaching artists. We learned the importance of putting our objectives for each exercise into the context of the day's session, and of a broader vision for learning. We explained our curricula choices before and after each exercise and modeled how to create a structure with clear parameters that opens up creative choices. The teaching artists also observed how we "controlled" time, and how imposing time limits can actually liberate creativity.

Our team-taught class that invited participation and reflective conversation appeared to be a novel concept for the group. They commented on the trust we had in one another and on the on-going negotiation of our teaching process. We aimed for our teaching style to mirror the creative process we sought in our exercises, and the risks we asked our students to take. We asked them to share their stories, articulate their goals, and to ask questions about what they were observing as a way to bridge cultural differences and develop trust.

Towards the end of the week the teaching artists worked in small teams to design curriculum for the rest of the group. This was not only fun for everyone but provided the ROH team with a valuable opportunity to evaluate how well the



Above: Teaching artist (left) with group of Young Advocates. British Council photographer: Mr Yang Yong.



Above: Young Advocates experiment with lifts. British Council photographer: Mr Yang Yong.

teaching artists had absorbed and synthesised the workshop objectives. We also provided practical suggestions for their individual teaching environments.

The use of ballet repertory as a springboard for creative work was new to many of the Chinese artists. They were accustomed to teaching repertory through lectures and demonstrations, but not to developing creative responses with a group of non-dancers. We chose to work with Chroma (Wayne McGregor) and Homage to the Queen (Ashton, Bintley, Corder, Wheeldon.) The teaching artists attended stage rehearsals of both at the NCPA. Our exploration of Chroma was enhanced by a workshop led by Wayne McGregor, who stressed the importance of teaching students to be prepared and to think. His workshop was a wonderful study in building complexity, and an insight into his creative process.

Many of the teaching artists, and some of our colleagues from the British Council and the NCPA who observed the community workshops, expressed surprise at how a group of non-dancers could be guided to create a moving and complex piece of original choreography within a relatively short workshop. It was initially challenging for the teaching artists to guide students to compose their own creative responses, rather than suggesting exactly what they might do; they discovered that they needed to have a clear picture of the process they planned to use, and to trust that the end result would emerge from that process.

This professional development experience asked the teaching artists (in their words) to 'accept a new teaching model', and 'to shift from passive learning to active creating' in their teaching practice. Reflecting on the week, they appreciated the concept of scaffolding exercises, finding balance between structure and freedom, and using

performance as inspiration for lesson designs. They also indicated how the accompanying music, as a familiar element, was invaluable in helping them explore new ideas. By the end of the week they clearly identified differences between ballet education and ballet training: "dance education is not a strict technique training." Many also talked about how the workshops had changed their perception of dance teaching and expanded their vision of who could participate in ballet education.

Overall the responses from the teaching artists were very positive, although some didn't yet feel that they had the confidence to apply all they had learnt to their own teaching. Despite its intensity, some would have appreciated a longer programme.

For the ROH team this was challenging work; reflections on each day's sessions and the planning for the next day continued late into the night. The cooperation that it took to engage in choreography, the witnessing of how ballet can be accessible to all populations and groups, and the dialogue about using the creative process in teaching all contributed to enhanced cultural understanding on both sides.

Jonathan Silverman is Assistant Professor of Education at St. Michael's College, Vermont, USA, and director of the Arts in Education concentration.

Martha Ming Whitfield was until August 2008 Ballet Education Manager at the Royal Opera House, and project managed The Royal Ballet's education work in China. She now works as an independent consultant.

contact jsilverman@smcvt.edu or mwhitfield@gmavt.net

For more information about ROH Education **contact** Clare Thurman, Ballet Education Manager at clare.thurman@roh.org.uk