



Tanz die Toleranz, Project 2012, choreographer: Romy Kolb. Photo: Laurent Ziegler.

If you can dance together, you can live together

Edith Wolf Perez, editor of the tanz.at webzine, retraces the history and celebrates the remarkable achievements of Tanz die Toleranz (Dance the Tolerance), in Vienna, Austria

The birth of community dance in Austria (as well as in Germany and Switzerland) can be dated to the release of the film *Rhythm is it!*, in 2004. This extraordinary documentary followed the creation of *The Rite of Spring* by choreographer Royston Maldoom, from the first rehearsals to a performance by 250 children from various schools in Berlin.

The initiative was part of the educational programme of the Berliner Philharmoniker, who played Stravinsky's score, conducted by their director Simon Rattle, at the show before an audience of 3,000 people. The film, however, reached about a million viewers and made a strong case for dance as a means of empowerment for the participating dancers. Some 30 years after Royston Maldoom had co-established this

artform as one of the pioneers in the UK, community dance had finally arrived at the heart of Europe.

One of the enthused viewers of *Rhythm is it!* was Werner Binnenstein-Bachstein, then General Secretary of the largest Catholic Non-governmental organisation (NGO), Caritas. For him, the film was an eye opener on the power of dance. Convinced of the physical and mental transformation that the young people experienced, he decided to invite Royston to Vienna to realise a project with the Wiener Symphoniker. With 230 children of different ethnic backgrounds, he choreographed Gustav Holst's *The Planets* for the opening event of Vienna's largest festival Wiener Festwochen, in 2007. The performance was broadcast through the cultural cooperation

channel of the public TV station, 3sat, in Austria and its neighbouring countries.

However, there was a catch. Royston would only take on the commission if sustainable provisions for community dance were established in Vienna after the performance. This was the beginning of Tanz die Toleranz (TdT), a programme founded and since then funded by Caritas. It is a unique arts initiative focused on the work in the community with an ongoing, regular programme.

A cultural centre in a neglected district

At the same time, the cultural centre of Caritas, Brunnenpassage, opened its doors in the rooms of the ancient market hall of Europe's largest street market, Brunnenmarkt, which is famous for its cultural diversity. In this area >>

International practice

of Vienna live a high proportion of migrants and socially disadvantaged peoples despite the gentrification that has been going on in recent years. The objective of Brunnenpassage is to represent this community through its cultural activities, mainly through participatory arts projects.

The location consists of a large room of 230m² where workshops and performances take place. The walls are transparent which allows not only a view of the market, but also of people walking by who look inside. This open concept made it a very good location for the activities of TdT, which became central to the programme of Brunnenpassage.

In the initial phases of the programme Tamara McLorg was appointed as artistic director. She gave a workshop for dancers to introduce them to the art and the skills of choreography and invited some of them as assistants to her internationally commissioned works. The careful tutoring and teaching of these dancers/ choreographers laid

the foundation for the artistic quality of TdT.

In 2011 Mexican born dancer and choreographer Monica Delgadillo became artistic director and has since established a continuous programme of contemporary dance for adults, young adults and children. The courses are free of charge and open to everyone who will commit to

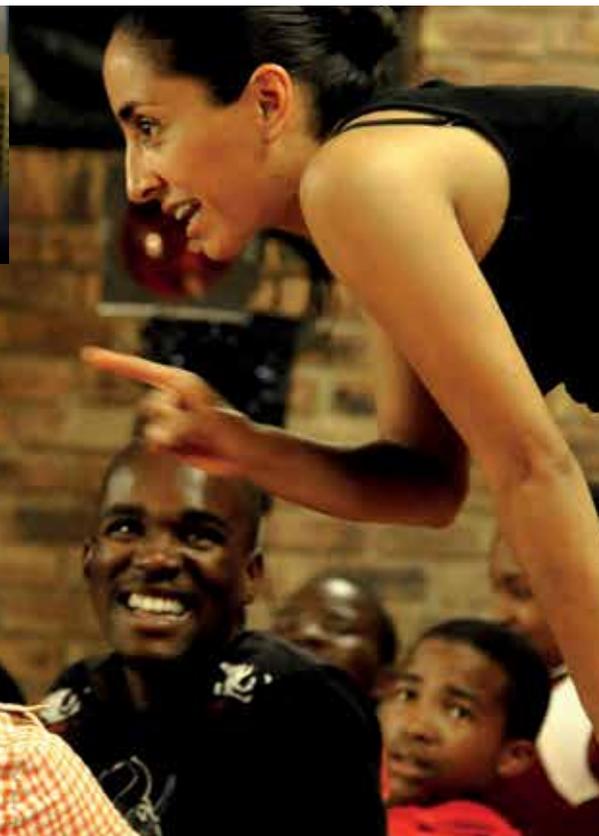
regular rehearsals for the end of term performances. The adult classes are especially popular and at times attract over 100 participants.

To lower the threshold further, shorter workshops were introduced to reach special communities such as the Indian, Latin American or Serbo-Croat population, or for disabled people.

Throughout the year there is also Saturdance; this features one-off events offered each Saturday afternoon to give a taste of different dance styles, from contemporary to ethnic and urban dance techniques.

“If you can dance together you can live together”

Not all communities are easy to reach: “It is difficult to reach the Turkish community, especially the women”, says Monica Delgadillo. For them, TdT is offering ‘hidden projects’, like dance classes just for women, and where only women are allowed to watch the performance. “We did the same with an all-male group”, says Monica, “where the choreographer had to be a man,



Above: Monica Delgadillo, assistant of Tamara McLorg, Ithuba project South Africa. Photo: Georg Rabe. All other images, Tanz die Toleranz – Top: Choreographer Romy Kolb. Photo: Karin Cheng. Middle: Choreographer Alessandra Tirendi. Photo: Barbara Mair. Bottom: Exil. Photo: Tanz die Toleranz.

but women were allowed to watch the performance. Those projects are not advertised because they happen in a protected, private frame.”

While Monica Delgadillo and her team respect cultural distinctions, they also undertake courageous attempts to overcome them. One highlight was certainly the co-production of the St John Gospel, by Johann Sebastian Bach, with the Viennese Boys Choir, the Austrian Baroque Company and others. The choreography of Monica Delgadillo for 80 dancers of all ages and abilities, “transformed Bach’s music into a plea for tolerance and diversity”(1).

“We had a lot of Muslim participants”, says Monica, “and so I did not focus on the text but on images that the viewer could interpret in her own way.

“One teacher was anxious about the reaction of the parents, but we persuaded her that it was not a religious project but an arts project. We had the aim to unite many different people in this project, so that they could grow together and overcome

cultural bias. For instance, many participants had never seen disabled people so close up let alone touch them before.”

The experience of TdT confirms Royston Maldoom’s view that: “If you can dance together you can live together.” And since its inception, the Viennese community dance project has reached over 10,000 people of diverse backgrounds to make this happen.

Monica describes community dance as, “the art with an aim, where the aim is, in general, that people on stage represent a society in which everybody is equal, everybody is included, and nobody is better or worse. Another aim is empowerment; the participants should go home with the feeling they have achieved something on their terms. This, for instance, is especially important for young unaccompanied refugees. They always have to do what they are told to do, and therefore their scope of action is quite restricted. The change of roles that they experience in our projects is very relevant to their situation. They not only take but also give something. They are on stage and show their skills, what they have learned, and they are proud of it.”

However, the social aims can only be achieved through a high artistic quality, believes Monica. The method used by TdT choreographers is to provide movement elements and combine them with improvisation in a set structure. “In our method it is the choreographer who decides, although one can argue whether this should be the task of the choreographer or the participants. We do it that way.” She has also set in place an intensive professional dialogue among the choreographers for the exchange of ideas, feedback and positive critique about their work.

Stepping out

Due to demand, the core team of choreographers (Monica Delgadillo, Romy Blok, Alessandra Tirendi and Juliett Zuza) is steadily expanding, and TdT is offering job opportunities for an increasing number of dancers, and especially for graduates from dance universities. They are invited to work in and outside of Vienna; for instance, with older people, in youth centers, with asylum seekers, in museums, schools or universities. The list of partners has grown to over 50

institutions.

Slowly but surely TdT is also finding its place in the mainstream Austrian dance scene which generally has reservations about the term ‘community arts’. The quality of the work is beginning to be recognised and there are partnerships with the Viennese dance house Tanzquartier Wien and Festspielhaus St. Pölten and the avant-garde dance festival imagetanz.

Coming back

Two years ago the office of TdT moved to a former bread factory, Anker Brotfabrik, in the 10th district of Vienna where 30 percent of the population are migrants. Here, the premises are used for the ballet class for adults, a youth dance group and last year’s tenth anniversary celebration.

Incidentally, this also means that community dance is having a comeback in this district. Here, the women of the Suschitzky family had set up a dance programme in the 1920s for working-class children to offer them access to the arts. Because of her Jewish origin, Olga Suschitzky was murdered in Auschwitz, but her daughters Carla and Ruth managed to escape from the Nazi regime. Now, with TdT, the tradition they had established has finally been allowed to continue.

Throughout the years the pioneer founders Royston Maldoom and Tamara McLorg have remained connected with the Viennese choreographers as teachers, tutors and counsellors. Following their tradition of international outreach, Monica and her colleagues are also venturing to other cultures – Mexico, Transnistria, Ukraine, and Moldavia – to help establish similar projects.

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References

1. Review in webzine www.tanz.at

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