

Broad Street Review

THE DANCING ORPHANS OF RWANDA

By: Rebecca Davis 07.20.2008



The contemporary Philadelphia choreographer Rebecca Davis recently spent four weeks teaching dance steps to street orphans in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, a suffering land known mostly for its 1994 genocide. To her surprise, she discovered a passion for dance that transcends anything found among American teenagers.

“These kids taught me that dance has the power to change lives even in the most difficult of circumstances,” she contends.

The author, Rebecca Davis (right), and her pupils:
‘Some of the best hip-hop dancers I’ve ever seen.’

AND YET THEY STILL DANCE:

MY LESSON FROM THE ORPHANS OF RWANDA

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Imagine a downtown dance studio in urban America. Now eliminate the parking lot, the corner coffee shop, the street lights that keep the road lit at night, the fluorescent sign outside, the “welcome” mat on which to wipe your feet, the dressing room, the bathroom, the mirrors, the ballet barres, the marley floor, and the sound system. In the remaining space, place four incredibly talented, untrained male hip-hop dancers.

Welcome to Rwanda, a nation still struggling to recover from the catastrophic loss of 10% of its population within three months during the 1994 genocide there.

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Over a recent four weeks, I had the opportunity— no, the privilege— of teaching contemporary dance to street kids in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Although I was technically “the teacher,” these kids taught me that dance has the power to change lives even in the most difficult of circumstances.

I arrived in Kigali on June 14 as one of 16 Americans participating in Global Youth Connect, a program devoted to studying and learning about human rights. The program integrates Americans and Rwandans into discussion-based workshops and other activities— in my case, working with street children in order to further develop their innate dance talent. I worked with several different groups of students and traditional dancers during my month-long stay, but by far the most revealing and influential experience involved four boys, aged 11 to 18, at the Peace House for Street Children, a home for orphans operated by AMANI Africa (amani means “peace” in Swahili).

Mass graves, giggling children

It’s not uncommon to find untrained youths who display a natural aptitude for dance. What makes this group unique are the circumstances under which they survive and thrive through dance. To visit a memorial like Murambi, where 50,000 mainly women and children were slaughtered, or to stand amidst mass graves holding 250,000 bodies and parts of bodies, forces one to question how humanity can smash its own heart time after time. And yet, with shocking juxtaposition, one can stand in the street and have a child run up to you smiling and giggling as she hands you a piece of candy. These signs of life and death exist side-by-side in Rwandan life every day.

All four of my “dancing boys”— Christian (15 years), Ramadhan (16), Mouggi (18) and little Passy (11)— are orphans. Either their parents and families were massacred in the genocide, or they’ve simply been abandoned, left to survive on their own as HIV and domestic violence continue to plague civil society. AMANI built a house where these children can come and live together, but the children do everything for themselves: cook their own meals, eat together, collect drinking water, clean the few bedrooms, go to school— and then come home and dance.

In the absence of a boom box

I was curious to see how these boys would perceive, and perhaps benefit, from some contemporary dance training. On my first visit to the Street House I stumbled upon a group of young boys perfectly mimicking hip-hop dance moves, ranging from AKON to Michael Jackson. Dressed in soccer jerseys, torn-up pants, and sandals that were falling apart, these self-taught boys were some of the best hip-hop dancers I’ve ever seen. Each could rival any professional dancer on “So You Think You Can Dance” if performing in the hip-hop genre (though maybe not the “crumping” style). These kids lack a boom box, so they take turns holding a scratchy handheld radio while the others practice their moves on a dusty dirt road at 8 a.m. and later continuing through all hours of the night.

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The kids peered suspiciously at me, a mzungo (“white person”), as I pushed open the corrugated tin gate. When I walked into the house, it was essentially barren. I never saw more than five wooden chairs and three tables the whole time I taught there. However, when I did walk into the house, I also walked into a family. These kids raise each other, hand in hand. They’re all brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to one another.

The passion for dance and hip-hop permeates the house. You can always find at least one kid singing and one kid dancing. In this place, it seemed to me, dance truly functions as a tool of unity, creative expression and survival. For that reason, the passion and respect these kids feel for dance far transcends what you’d find among a group of American teenage boys.

A 30-second miracle

For my first class I had a group of ten Rwandans from ages ten to 18 crammed into a room with a single bare light bulb and a single translator: Yves Rwibutso, a Rwandan student and artist himself. My basic instructions were translated to the group, and then we dove into a jazz dance warm-up.

Within about 30 seconds, smiles appeared on the students’ faces as they followed along with the new movements. By the end of the 90-minute session, ten kids had succeeded in learning *soutenu*, *battement*, *pas de chat* and *soudechaut*— not to mention the first 25 seconds of a contemporary combination. I was overwhelmed by the kids’ ability to pick up new steps and choreography, especially when none of them spoke English (and I failed miserably at speaking Kinyarwanda).

Three classes later, four of these boys were already performing a short contemporary combination in front of other Americans and Rwandans in a July Fourth celebration. The date marks the end of Rwanda’s devastating 1994 genocide, which took the lives of one million civilians. It was amazing to see the progress of these young dancers in such a short period of time, and it was also rewarding to see Americans and Rwandans share the performance experience together.

Working with these street kids proved to me that dance has a critical role to play in a post-conflict country. If an exchange of dance moves can transcend barriers of language, race and age, couldn’t dance also play an important role in rebuilding an individual, a family or perhaps even a nation? It sounds idealistic, I know. But if we can all clap our hands and stamp our feet, can’t we also hold hands in peace?

Rebecca Davis is Founder, President & Artistic Director of REBECCA DAVIS DANCE COMPANY, based in Philadelphia.