

Ballet, Flamenco, Hip Hop — Dance For World Community And Social Change



A performance during Dance for World Community 2015. (Courtesy Charles Daniels/Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre)

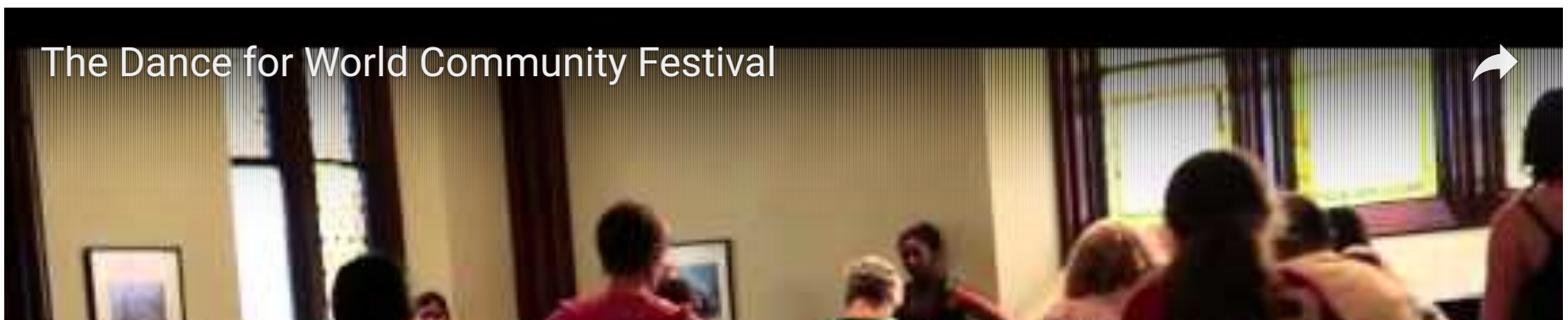
Keith Powers June 7, 2016



One man believes that you can dance your way to profound social change. It seems like he's convinced quite a few others as well.

Around 15,000 people will descend on Harvard Square on Saturday to enjoy the sights and activities associated with [Dance for World Community](#). Almost a hundred dance organizations: ballet dancers, modern dancers, belly dancers, swing dancers, capoeira dancers, flamenco, kathak, fusion, hip hop — you get the idea, every form imaginable — will activate stages set up around the square.

The Dance for World Community Festival





But that's not all there is to see. In keeping with DWC's mission of dance infused with social activism, dozens of advocacy groups join in as well. Communities Without Borders, MASSCreative, Spaulding Rehabilitation Network, Girl Up Clubs, BostonGLOW, Better Future International, Greater Boston Legal Services, Homeless Empowerment Project — these are just some of the groups that have aligned themselves with a vision that melds the power of dance with the goal of bettering communities.

Dance for World Community takes place in and around Harvard Square on Saturday, June 11 from noon till 8 p.m. In addition, during the week preceding the festival, there are public lectures, a film series, dance and advocacy workshops. For a complete listing of events, visit [DWC's website](#).

It's all José Mateo's idea. The Cuban-born choreographer, whose Ballet Theatre just finished celebrating its 30th season, believes that his personal responsibility extends much further than "just" creating dozens of neo-classical ballet works, training hundreds of dancers and performing before thousands of audience members.



José Mateo of José Mateo Ballet Theatre. (Courtesy Gary Sloan)

“I think Dance for World Community will be the most important part of my contribution,” he says. “It deserves to be.

“You can’t say, ‘I’m just an artist.’ If I did that, my work would not be done. I have to help everyone understand that they have a greater responsibility. DWC brings that understanding to the broader community.”

Dance does not seem like the logical path leading to solutions for poverty, health issues, housing

inadequacies and social justice. Except to people like Mateo. And when you talk to him about it, you believe as well. As do the tens of thousands of people who have come to Harvard Square for the past eight years.

“We have been taught to separate the arts from more serious concerns. But this whole project is based on the idea that we are all dancers. Everyone has a personal experience — it may seem like an insignificant memory — about dance, that gives us an insight into a different side of that person.

“The question was how to demonstrate that dance can have a powerful voice in improving communities, in housing, public health, transportation, education. Dance can play a role in all these things. My curiosity was about harnessing that power.

“When it comes to social change, dance companies, historically, have partnered with a single cause. They might join with the AIDS action committee, and do a one-time event. They might even choreograph a piece about a social issue. But then they turn their attention to another issue.”

This is not what Dance for World Community is about. “There was a reason we named it so broadly,” Mateo says. “This is an initiative that looks to develop over time, and cultivate long-term partnerships.”



It started with organizing the dancers. “We are so compartmentalized,” he says of the dance world. “The community is quite large, but never gets represented as a force. We’re all specialists — it’s a necessity in

order to practice art at the highest level. Arts organizations are accused of being territorial, but we have to be — we're all in survival mode. The competition is fierce.”

Bringing together the disparate dance community was the first step. “I spent several years working out ideas before we launched,” Mateo says. “I wanted more than just the performing organizations. I wanted the broader population: audiences, all forms of dance, even experts who do research into sociology and anthropology — they study dance as well. It’s a powerful, healing art form. When you bring these people into the same space, things can happen.”

And things did happen. Initially, just the notion that dance troupes could show off their stuff — “a key factor at first was the visibility,” he says — rallied the community. “Dance has power. Everyone dances — in clubs, in their culture, by themselves in their living rooms. People see honesty in dance. The ability to transcend verbal language can be a viable force in better communities. You don’t see terrorist organizations using dance as a medium.”

Troupe Al-Jawary Al-Hessan at Dance for World Community Festival



But Dance for World Community hasn’t just been about giving diverse dance troupes a place to perform together, and then expecting magic to happen. Mateo and DWC organizers have held community meetings — “we never, ever fail to learn something from sitting down with people and hearing about their experiences,” he says. “Even me, after all this time watching, teaching, choreographing.

“Three times a year we do [TALKABOUTDANCE](#), with people who are directly involved in the intersection

of dance and social concerns. Every one has been a fascinating experience. Now we have a film series — people have made wonderful films about dance. This fall we held neighborhood meetings. It was a kind of oral history — the stories about churches that had dance schools, the people who started those performing groups that many not have survived but who left a mark.”

José Mateo has left his mark. Dance for World Community will continue, “and little by little I’ll be stepping out of the picture. But the Ballet Theatre board has embraced DWC. At first there was skepticism, when the connections between dance and other aspects of our lives were not so apparent.

“Our network has grown. We’ve had a school for thirty years now — actually longer — and we have a lot of students in different places. Many went into dance, and many into other areas, and they are desperately looking to connect what dance did for them with what they do now.

“Next year we’ll invite people from other cities to see what we do, and get them to think about learning exchanges in their own communities. It’s just about developing a network of partners that are focused on expanding dance for positive purposes.

“I always say that dance is an awareness practice. Our dances may look different, but all dancers can meet each other on a level plane. And we can validate each other’s dance on the spot.

“Every time we’re engaged in dance, we’re learning something, being enriched. It would be wonderful to see some of our political candidates dance, to see where they really come from.”



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