



AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE: HOW DO YOU FEEL CONNECTED?

If you're one of those people who subscribes to the theory that lockdown created the ultimate opportunity to learn, spare a thought for the educators. Every carefully considered stitch of their work suddenly requires unravelling before being miraculously repurposed into something new, but equally as fit for purpose. For the education team at American Ballet Theatre, who reach thousands of young people through Burberry Inspire and their own in-house learning programmes, this transformation should have been all-consuming. But it wasn't. "We always have big ideas and high standards for what we expect to get done," says Dennis J. Walters, Director of Education Operations at ABT. "But it's been a year where we can't worry about the things we can't control. We can only take what's in front of us and do the best programme we possibly can, given the circumstances."

“

ENGAGEMENT LOOKS DIFFERENT, AND IT'S TAKEN US A WHILE TO DEFINE THAT. KIDS WITH CAMERAS OFF DOES NOT MEAN THEY'RE NOT ENGAGED.

Lockdown has been an obvious frustration for an organisation that relies so much on shared spaces and movement, but it's telling that both Dennis and Richard Toda (Artistic Manager of ABT Engagement), are both practical and enthusiastic about the direction that the programme has taken through forced adaptation to this new state of affairs. However, they both acknowledge that it's taken a shift in mindset and approach to get here. "Negotiation," says Dennis, firmly. "If we went in, as we normally would, to plan thirteen weeks of classes, the principals are going to roll their eyes. They don't even know if the kids are going to be in the building. Instead, we just asked for 45 or 60 minutes." The thinking was that when schools were in a state of stress, approaching the liaisons, co-ordinators or principals in a calculated way would reduce any potential resistance to getting involved. This would allow ABT to demonstrate the benefits and outcomes, rather than any immediate workload involved. "Trying to measure the expectations and rethink strategy," Dennis explains. "We never even talked about 'the huge programme' or cultural runway. It was there but never spoken of."

“

IN EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO CONTROL, SURPRISING THINGS HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL. LIKE OUR SUMMER PROGRAMMES – WHO'S GOING TO PAY FOR A VIRTUAL SUMMER INTENSIVE EXPERIENCE? WELL, APPARENTLY A LOT OF PEOPLE.



Sketches from a student note book entry.

“

WHAT'S EXCITING IS THE CHAT – REGARDLESS OF WHETHER CAMERAS ARE ON – WHEN TEACHERS ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT VIDEOS, IT'S ALWAYS FULL. SO, KIDS DO STEP UP AND THEY ARE RESPONDING.

Once the shift in thinking was achieved both by the schools and by ABT, the process of remote educating was surprisingly productive and actually had some real benefits. Normally, for example, the whole programme would hinge around the finale of seeing a performance – readying the students for that goal as an endpoint. But, as Richard explains, removing the live performance changes the entire framework of the programme. "We've always been about introducing. We're introducing the teaching artist and they introduce the students to ABT. Those students would usually see ABT once. But now we're digital, we get to share video and they're seeing American Ballet Theatre or our second company every week that they're in the programme." In this fashion, Richard believes that the dancers become the first point of engagement with ABT, as opposed to the teaching artists. "We have become the engagement tool for them to become more connected to the company."

The majority of students that ABT are working with this year have been unable to access their Creativity Kits ("out of 505 kids at one school, 86 of them were given out"), simply because the schools closed their doors and education went almost entirely remote across New York. But the good news is that the schools they are currently working with are recipients of a technology grant from Verizon, so students largely all have access to digital devices through which they can participate effectively in lessons and access tools such as Google Classrooms, Flipgrid and Book Creator. This gives ABT an opportunity to see and read students work that other Burberry Inspire partner organisations might not.

However, building a sense of confidence and community is another layer of challenge, and while they may have access to lessons, access to each other is a sad side effect of the pandemic. "one of the bigger issues, is that a lot of the kids have never met each other before," Dennis explains. "They've come into the school, but they're only doing remote learning, so they've never physically made friends. The 6th graders hardly know each other. The reason it's hard to get the kids to turn their cameras on is because there's not that community." Social and Emotional education plays a large part in building the confidence of these young people and Richard stresses that each teaching artist

checks in with their students during every class, as well as schools putting in place formal SEL lessons to give the young people effective strategies for living and working in a time like no other. Beyond the classroom, Richard and Dennis can barely contain their adoration for their UK partners at Northern Ballet, with whom they conceived and executed their Creativity Kits, but also collaborated on video production, and shared ideas and resources. It was an almost instant fit. "We realised right off the bat that we matched and meshed, and Richard and Philippa [Ranger, Northern Ballet Dance Education Officer] were like two sides of a coin. They matched really well and were able to create well together." Organisationally, Dennis felt a real sense of "familiarity" in not only the way they approached the Burberry Inspire programme, but in terms of educational standards and philosophy. It was instinctively a perfect match and continues to go from strength to strength as they learn more and more from each other, navigating together the difficulties and challenges that educating in a time of Covid brings. "Richard and Philippa have been back and forth non-stop," says Dennis. "There are still things that we want to do and didn't get to do because of the unknowing nature of the school year. We wanted more interactions between our teaching artists, for example, but it never made sense."

'Green shoots' is probably a little optimistic at this stage, but there are certainly things to look forward to for ABT. At the time of writing, the company are beginning to perform live again, albeit to a very small audience in a very large theatre. Most schools are still learning remotely almost all the time, but the intention and desire to open up more and more is significant. Dennis for one, has found that this year has shown him that no problem is insurmountable ("Before, I could always give you ten reasons why we couldn't do a talkback for 500 kids following a show, but now I'm like... what can we do?") and for Richard, his focus is on the now and creating those all-important connections between the students and ABT, and among the students themselves.

"We want to make sure that they have ways to engage and feel connected to a school building they might not have been in yet. For the kids, they're connected to the school through Zoom. Their community is virtual right now. So, how do you show up for your community?"

