

UB Post, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

By Dulguun, Oct 10, 2019

<https://theubposts.com/encounters-proves-there-is-no-boundary-in-dancing/>

‘Encounters’ proves there is no boundary in dancing



Dancing isn't just for able-bodied people – it is an inclusive art for everyone, including children, men and women, seniors, people in wheelchairs, people with disabilities and whatever precondition they may have. This is a new lesson I learned last weekend while watching “Encounters”, a one-time contemporary dance concert by four professional dancers and four people in wheelchairs.

Most of the dances we go to see in theaters or on stage are performed by dancers who have been training for years, but “Encounters” was different. Being the first wheel-chaired dance performance held in Mongolia, the show created a beautiful synergy between people with different levels of disability and incongruous dancing skills. Like a cool breeze on a hot summer day, it was a refreshing performance that comforted, inspired, fired up and educated people, all the while taking not only the dancers but also the audience out of their comfort zone. It might have been just the thing that we needed to breakdown stereotypes, take performances to a new height that doesn't have boundaries on performances or performers, and inspire people with and without disabilities to explore their possibilities.

This performance was brought together by the Swinging Wheelchair Project, initiated by Bidchadna NGO and supported by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. As part of the project, Swiss choreographer and founder of YET Company Fabian Cohn came to Mongolia for three weeks to choreograph and direct this

performance involving professional and amateur dancers. In such a short period of time, he created a unique movement language that works with inner pictures as well as with the visualization of elements (like water, air, etc.) and “body systems” (like bones, lymph, muscles, skin, nerves, etc.).

According to Cohn, “Encounters” is about distance and proximity and portrays how people’s paths can cross, how we as humans can approach each other and how we can overcome differences that distance us from others.



Fabian Cohn

“This topic of ‘encounters’ was in my mind because it could be one of the bridges that can bring people together in this time and age with so much borders between humans. ‘Encounters’ is one opportunity to overcome distance,” the choreographers said. “I hope that ‘Encounters’ becomes a bridge to overcome distances just as we did during the process. The people taking part in the concert worked together to find solutions to overcome their differences. They’re also on their own paths to discover their opportunities and open up their minds to new possibilities.”

Cohn said that the performance does not aim to show movement perfection, but rather on finding personal and individual expressions. The form of this expression is said to come from authenticity and inner imaginations of each dancer.

“I didn’t want dancers to focus on showing something but to actually feel the emotions they want to express because spectators can see if they’re expressing an emotion or simply movement,” he noted.

In this sense, dancers were also handpicked by Cohn through an audition. He explained rather than exceptional dancers, he wanted to involve different types of people with different approaches to dance as it could create a more dynamic performance and bring out the key message of the dance – overcoming distances. Although there were more skilled applicants, he believed the selected dancers would make a good combination altogether.

“One of the dancers can’t use his arms, one doesn’t have a leg, one can’t move both of her legs and another dancer has body paralysis. They’re all very different from each other. However, when you combine them, it’s enriching and helps us become more open-minded,” stated Cohn. “My goal was to find out what they can do together and respect the different abilities. We had three weeks to complete the dance. Normally, I work on a project much longer. So, it involved a lot of improvisation and I had to help dancers become more comfortable with body contact and alleviate their fear of touching others. Contemporary dancers are used to this but it’s new for other people.”

He added that dancers in wheelchair opened new opportunities to perform and that he enjoyed exploring the unlimited ways of incorporating wheelchairs into the dance.

“Our participants are very used to wheelchairs so they can skillfully operate their wheelchair. They can do a lot of movements. It’s not about who’s better or worse at something but what they can do. They all took immense amount of courage to participate in this project. I was moved that they all wholeheartedly devoted to the project and wanted to bring out the best performance they could make.”

‘I get to fully dive through my inner self’

On the day of the performance, I got to watch a rehearsal for the “Encounters” concert and speak with some of the dancers.

I first met with 23-year-old M.Bolor-Uyanga, who is a professional dancers and dance trainer with prior experience in this type of project. She participated in a dance workshop held for children living with disabilities at School No. 53 in 2013. As soon as I started speaking with her, I could feel her excitement.

M.Bolor-Uyanga said she cherished this opportunity which enabled her to grow as a dancer and learn from a Swiss choreographer particularly because she hopes to one day attend a dance course in Berlin, Germany. She was also fascinated to learn Cohn’s new teaching approach.

“I really wish to learn contemporary dance in Berlin, but right now, I feel as if I’m studying there. It’s as if I’ve found a pearl from an oyster when I least expected it. I’m learning much more. Rather than stage-oriented dance or technique-based performance which prioritizes facial expression and appearance, I’m able to learn ways to express myself and my inner emotions through dance under Fabian’s instructions. I’m really grateful for this opportunity as I get to fully dive through my inner self and develop more,” she said.

“Our choreographer told us to express whatever we feel using our body, but how the audience perceives it is up to them. I’m sure spectators will understand our performance in various ways but most importantly, I hope that they find it interesting and enjoy it from beginning to end. I don’t want to bind them with my concepts for the concert.”

When I asked her how it feels to dance with people in wheelchairs, she confessed that she felt some distance and difficulty with participants in wheelchairs at first but came to realize that they were “ordinary people who just happen to be in wheelchairs”.

“These people may be in wheelchairs but they’re just like us – able to think and express themselves like anyone else. The only challenge for them is that they can’t stand up. They’re very passionate and driven people who are used to pushing their boundaries,” she said.

Looking back at her experiences working with children and adults with disabilities, M.Bolor-Uyanga hopes that more opportunities are created for them.

“Through this opportunity, I felt like we needed to focus more on children with disabilities and give them the opportunity to learn new things, socialize better and erase the mindset that people with and without disabilities live in different worlds. I guess we create distance amongst ourselves.”



Fabian Cohn rehearsing with dancers

“I never imagined dancing could be like this”

Next, I briefly talked with B.Batchimeg, a social worker who has been paralyzed from waist down since birth. She had a bit of dancing experience while competing in the Beauty in Wheelchair beauty pageant in the past.

“I’m very happy to be participating in this project. In general, we – people with disabilities – lack exercise and movement because we can’t dance or run. My whole body was very stiff but over the last 20 or so days, I became more flexible and even lost some weight,” she said. “During my previous one and only experience in dancing, I just had to follow steps and do movements to the beat but this dance is more about inner emotions and expression of individuality. Fabian doesn’t order us to do exact movement, instead he tells us to express our feelings through our body. For example, if I’m trying to show a ball, I need to portray it with my whole body, including nose, mouth, and fingertips. I never imagined dancing could be like this.”

B.Batchimeg enjoyed the choreography process where she could freely express her ideas and help improvise the dances. She says that this is very different from the usual way of learning dance, which involves a dance teacher teaching all of the steps. It also enables her to make the best of her own abilities, as she put it.

“We might not be able to perfectly perform the movements but this dance has been created with all of our feelings and passion,” she said. “Although everyone is different but there’s no boundary for feelings and the mind. I hope our feelings and the things we want to express get through to the audience.”



B.Batchimeg

Mirroring life and encounters

The name encounters felt like the perfect name for this concert. It visualized that encounters don't happen just between men and women. An encounter constantly occurs between men and women, men and men, and women and women. It could lead to friendship, romantic relationship, acquaintanceship, or simply nothing at all.

At the beginning of the performance, I frankly didn't understand what was happening – all I could see was a shimmering black cloth. But then, the dancers appeared from under it and their movements became bigger and wilder but very slowly. I felt like the dancers were trying to demonstrate the creation of life; show that people grow little by little from microscopic cells and that everyone is born the same – without boundaries.

As the performance progressed, the dancers found their unique characteristic and individualism and started to pass by each other with no contact at all. Over time, we see them making contact – starting from eye contact to simple touches to more intimate body contact. I expected some awkward moments with the wheelchairs but instead, found that it was a unique addition to perform movements we normally don't see in performances. For example, a dancer posing on the back of a person in wheelchair as he maneuvered across the stage, and a person pulling another in wheelchair backward to show a beautiful scene.

The concert wasn't just about encounters. In between, it showed two people with the same passion and desires struggling to find each other. Even without words, this was portrayed using sound and lighting. The ending was similar to the beginning. We see the dancers gradually make their movements smaller and going back into their original form – all on the floor, without wheelchairs, without boundaries. It reminded me the undeniable truth of life that people are born and eventually die.

However, this wasn't the end. Right after, dancers became still, two girls and a boy appeared on stage just like how the older dancers began the show. It was a welcome surprise demonstrating the flexibility and beautiful form of the human body through two young female dancers who helped a young boy living with disabilities.

Overall, it was a meaningful experience and performance full of inspiration for children, parents, young people and people with disabilities alike. It showed that anything is possible as long as there's passion and will for it.

I hope to see more of this type of inclusive performance in the future.



Performers bowing to the audience