

Sharing the Language of Dance

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University at Buffalo students overcome cultural obstacles to learn Chinese dance

By Jeanne Fornarola and Laura Neese

Imagine taking a dance class from a Chinese teacher who speaks no English. No problem, right? Dancers communicate nonverbally through movement and verbally through the unique language of dance. They speak a bit of French—*tendu*, *degagé*, *relevé*—and respond with the appropriate movement when cued with universal terms like *pirouette en dehors*. But what happens when you move beyond the classroom to choreography, where the movement might move beyond the standard dance vocabulary, and when the language is truly foreign and the music is unfamiliar in tone, pitch, and instrumentation?



Mastering the proper use of Chinese fans was a challenge for student dancers (left to right) Tiffany DeNinis, Laura Neese, Angela Todaro, Courtney Agius, and Brittany Whitford. (Photo by Renee Connors)

Nine college dance majors from the University at Buffalo (UB) can testify to the challenges and joys of overcoming these obstacles when they were invited to collaborate with the Department of Asian Studies to perform at the grand opening of the new campus Confucius Center. They would study and rehearse with guest artist in residence Xingqiong He of the Chengdu Musical Theater Troupe.

Pre-production began by casting dancers not only for their technical proficiency but also for their ability to be generous in spirit, friendly, creative, and adapt quickly to new ideas and situations. Detailed information about the dancers, including body measurements and personal information such as coloring, handedness, and shoe size, was sent to costume designers in China. Ten weeks later the curtain rose to reveal the ensemble dressed in elaborate traditional Chinese costumes and dancers who performed flawlessly.

The journey to perfection was preceded by hours in the studio sprinkled with trial and error, frustration and laughter as “Ms. He” and the dancers forged their way through the rehearsal process. Quickly, the verbal language barrier morphed into the secret code of nonverbal communication known as dance.

In the following paragraphs, senior dance major Laura Neese shares her thoughts on the process and product of this unique experience.

Laura Neese shares her experience

Before we met Xingqiong He and as the first rehearsal drew closer, the cast members shared glances and words of excitement. We couldn’t wait to meet this international choreographer whose resume we had studied on our computer screens and whose full name we couldn’t pronounce.

Our first impression of Ms. He was that she was a tiny lady who could speak a mile a minute in a tongue we couldn’t understand and twist her body in ways we didn’t think possible. During our first meeting, we watched videos of the dances we would be learning, with a mixture of excitement and intimidation. The dancers moved precisely and clearly, and in one of the pieces, extremely fast. How were we American-trained dancers, with very different technical and cultural backgrounds, going to be able to embrace and perform the foreign vernacular movements convincingly?

And so we began with basics and learned to walk in “Chinese.” We practiced walking heel to toe, one foot in front of the other like tightrope walkers, and soon learned that every dance contained this basic walk.

“Ms. He had very high expectations for us and challenged us in every rehearsal,” says senior dance major Angela Todaro. “The choreography was intricate, with detailed attention to shoulder, hand, and finger placement and pointed and flexed feet.”

The first few rehearsals were frustratingly inefficient for both choreographer and cast due to consistent misunderstanding and dependence on translators. Although Ms. He did not speak much English, she could certainly say “no” and “wrong.” She would indicate a movement such as “lift your leg next to your ear, no hands, and hold it” and laugh (good-naturedly, of course) at our attempts. We weren’t exactly Chinese acrobats.

“It was amazing how much we bonded with and [came to] understand someone we could not understand at all using words.” —Tiffini DeNinis

At times Ms. He would become upset when we did not understand or execute a movement correctly. Helping us communicate during rehearsals were Sakura Lin, a freshman theater student who is semi-fluent in Mandarin, and Lan Zhang, a local Chinese-American dancer. But as we became more familiar with one another, the dancers began to understand what Ms. He was asking, despite comprehending almost nothing of what she said.

Ms. He's ability to contextualize other traditional Eastern movements in familiar ballet terms was very helpful for our Western brains and bodies. She would raise rounded arms above her head in fifth position and say, "Ballet." Then she would flip her palms upward, bend her elbows, and say, "Chinese." Her pointed, turned-out foot would shift into a flexed, parallel position, and so on.

One of the biggest movement challenges was learning how to use a Chinese fan. The dance *To Study* involved opening and closing fans that sported specific characters on either side, which had to be shown at precise times. Early in the rehearsal process, Ms. He whipped open a fan with the correct character facing out, spun it, and closed it with one hand. We were struggling to pry our fans open with two. She gave each dancer a fan to practice with at home to the point of mastery. Ms. He would accept no less.

Soon we could communicate through key English phrases, gestures, and facial expressions. We joked that we were beginning to speak Mandarin very well! Ms. He began to know us individually and we developed a friendly relationship. Bouts of laughter were the norm during rehearsals. "[Communicating] was a challenge, but it forced all of us to work as a team to figure out how to respond to Ms. He," says junior dance major Tiffini DeNinis. "It was amazing how much we bonded with and [came to] understand someone we could not understand at all using words. This was a very important and positive experience that I was lucky to be a part of."

Ms. He's vivid, theatrical explanations of the themes and characters of each dance helped us connect with each role to draw out the right performance quality. In the dance *Come Catch Me Brother*, we took on roles of flirting young men and women in the countryside. Ms. He dramatically demonstrated the roles: dainty, high-pitched girls and deep-voiced, grounded, mischievous boys. She eased us into character through laughter and then said, "Go." The seemingly impossible phrasing and clarity of movement came with better understanding of characters and lots of practice.

Our technical advancement improved exponentially and surprisingly quickly as we developed a bond with our choreographer. Within only a few weeks, we could understand Ms. He's pidgin mixture of Mandarin, broken English, and gesture even before our translators reiterated it.

On the day of the performance we were thrilled to don our beautiful custom-made costumes and share what we had worked so hard to learn with dignitaries from the University at Buffalo, the City of Buffalo, and Capital Normal University in Beijing. During tech rehearsals, guest artists and performing-arts students from Capital Normal joined us. As we warmed up together, they helped us refine our Mongolian port de bras.

After the performance, we were sad to see our collaboration end. Ms. He gave each of us a piece of paper with "Practice makes perfect" written on it in Mandarin and English. She encouraged us to contact her if we're ever in China, and we hope to take her up on the offer someday. —LN

Breaking down barriers

The study of cultural dance promotes understanding of the world. With that broadened perspective, students view diversity through a wider lens and embrace differences through the

commonalities of their art form. Because of this project at UB, Dr. Eric Yang, executive director of the University at Buffalo Confucius Center, invited students Sally Mementowski and John Kasten to perform in China, and Brittany Whitford and Laura Neese chose to study abroad at Chichester University in Chichester, England.

Intercultural communication through the arts can facilitate acceptance and understanding, one *tendu* at a time.