

dedicated to quality dance education

DANCE *Studio* LIFE

January 2014 | Volume 19 Issue 1

Global Dance

Living Traditions:
Native American worldview

Jean Appolon takes Horton
and more to Haiti

A world of themes:
costumes & backdrops

South African dance lands at
Laney College

Vanaver Caravan's
eclectic offerings

Plus—

Ballet programs for boys

New! College Close-Ups

New! Music tips for teachers

9696 511
www.dancestudiolife.com

Mixing It Up



World dances, lindy hop, and Denishawn— Vanaver Caravan does it all

By Joseph Carman

Where can you find lindy hop, flamenco, Appalachian clog dancing, the Senegalese “Mama” Spirit Dance, New England contra dances, urban stomp dancing, Romanian stick dances, and Woody Guthrie’s folk tunes, plus reconstructions of Ruth St. Denis’ and Ted Shawn’s classics?

Only at Vanaver Caravan, a touring ensemble that combines global indigenous dance with live music in a singular fashion.

Started in 1972 by Livia Drapkin Vanaver and her husband, Bill Vanaver, Vanaver Caravan has been touring domestically and internationally ever since. And through its educational branch, Caravan delivers world dance and music to kids and teens in classrooms and workshops.

Genesis and evolution

Vanaver Caravan generally features 20 to 25 performers, including dancers, singers, and musicians, ages 9 to 70. Based in New Paltz, New York, the troupe performs or teaches throughout the year. The performers, from Brazil, Guatemala, the United States, Senegal, Turkey, Canada, and India, bring individual talents and expertise to the

Photo by Lois Greenfield

company's authentic style.

"Vanaver Caravan is always evolving," Livia Vanaver says. "We're always adding new things and carrying forward styles we love. We have people in our company from all over the world who bring their indigenous styles into the company. They have solos, but they all dance in the ensemble pieces."

Vanaver's interest in world dance started at a tender age, beginning with her studies of Jewish dance forms in Queens. At Hillcrest Jewish Center summer camp, she studied with Joyce Mollov, who specialized in interpretive dance and Israeli folk dance and invited instructors to teach all types of world dance.

Hooked, Vanaver regularly studied 25 styles of indigenous dance. "My passion was modern and world dance from an early age," she says. "I didn't see any company I wanted to be in that would satisfy both." In 1971, she met her future husband, Bill, a composer who played banjo and Balkan music, and discovered they had similar interests.

In 1972, Bill Vanaver was playing on the folk music circuit and was invited by famed producer Izzy Young to do a concert at Washington Square Methodist Church in the

"My passion was modern and world dance from an early age. I didn't see any company I wanted to be in that would satisfy both." —Livia Vanaver

West Village. After that, a producer asked the Vanavers to perform a series of concerts on the deck of the *Wavertree*, a historic sailing vessel docked at the South Street Seaport. They subsequently obtained a grant from the Creative Artists Public Service Program that helped pay for dancers, teachers, and choreographers.

"That's how Vanaver Caravan got started," says Livia Vanaver. "By forming a company, we could have a vehicle for our work together. I don't know of any company that has had this long a commitment to world dance, contemporary dance, and live music."

(continued on next page)

BELOW: Vanaver Caravan performs a stick dance as part of *Earthbeat! A Journey*. OPPOSITE: Vanaver ensemble member Isabella Cottingham performs "Chinese Ribbon," one of the indigenous styles performed by the company.

Photo by Dale Dong





Earthbeat! A Journey comprises a program of traditional and original dances from around the globe.

(continued from previous page)

Traversing continents, exploring eras

The troupe currently presents three programs. *Pastures of Plenty* pays tribute to the late Woody Guthrie, the great American folksong artist. A collection of danced vignettes, the show moves across the American musical landscape, capturing Virginia reels, clog dancing, lindy hop, and urban street dances, as well as moving portraits of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Using material and ideas from the dancers and choreographers who work with the company, Vanaver directs and choreographs the pieces, weaving them into full scenarios. The performers usually learn the styles from artists who have expertise in those styles, and that artist often is featured as a soloist. Vanaver says the dancers learn the styles the way a chorus learns a music selection and she “arranges” the material the way a composer or conductor would orchestrate a score.

Earthbeat! A Journey comprises a program of traditional and original dances from around the globe. The dynamic evening begins with Japanese drumming and includes the English “Rapper Sword” dance, French Canadian and Cape Breton step dancing, South African gumboot dancing, the Philippine Igorot Sun Dance, Indian kuchipudi, as well as indigenous dances from Bulgaria, Brazil, and Spain, body percussion, and stick dances. In their contrasting ways, all

the dances express people’s need to harmonize with the earth. “*Earthbeat! A Journey* is almost like an invocation,” Vanaver says.

First performed in 1982, *Streets of Gold* uses traditional and contemporary dance and music to depict the immigrant experience of arriving in New York City. “It was based on stories about the immigration of the performers in our company at the time,” Vanaver says. “We’ve retained a few pieces from then, but we’ve created others based on experiences of people who are now in the company. It’s like a mini-musical. There are some funny parts, some poignant parts. It takes you from being on boats to Ellis Island and ends up in a crowded subway car in New York City.” The uplifting compilation includes Irish dancing, flamenco, and Armenian folk dancing, among many others.

Keeping history alive

Another aspect of the performing, related to indigenous styles in terms of its source material, is the preservation of dances from the Denishawn school. (St. Denis and Shawn derived much of their material from ethnic sources, such as Indian or Native American dance.) In 1979 Vanaver met Jane Sherman, a dancer who had toured with the Denishawn Company in 1925. With her help, Vanaver reconstructed

Photo by Dale Dong

11 pieces by St. Denis and Shawn, several of which the company first danced at a benefit performance in 1979.

Five American Sketches includes a group of works choreographed by Shawn in the 1920s: *Around the Hall in Texas*, *A Gringo Tango*, *Danse Americaine*, and *Pasquinade*, all of which present a comedic and historical take on American life. Also included is *Boston Fancy: 1854*, a beautifully costumed period piece that uses pantomime and New England contra dances and satirizes Boston's Beacon Hill society.

Sherman, who died in 2010, also re-created other pieces for Vanaver Caravan: *Tillers of the Soil*, a duet depicting two Egyptian peasants by St. Denis and Shawn; and *Sinhalese Devil Dance* and *Mevlevi Dervish* by Shawn.

The Caravan performances always use live music, arranged by Bill Vanaver, for the entirety of the programs. Some of the musicians have performed with the company for more than 30 years. The world dance shows utilize

"We bring in guest teachers to do workshops [for children] in West African dance, flamenco, and Afro-Brazilian. Everybody gets a background in modern technique and improvisation, choreography, and world dance." —Livia Vanaver

For more than four decades, Vanaver Caravan has attempted to promote peace by presenting dances of many cultures.



Photo by Lois Greenfield

instrumentation from all over the world, including stringed and wind instruments, and a drummer from West Africa.

Classes for kids

One of the most vital branches of Vanaver Caravan is its educational program. Caravan Kids Project offers classes to students in New Paltz and Stone Ridge, New York. Classes begin at age 4 with creative movement; older students can choose world dance, modern technique, choreography classes, Appalachian clogging, and other percussive movement.

"We bring in guest teachers to do workshops in West African dance, flamenco, and Afro-Brazilian," Vanaver says. "Everybody gets a background in modern technique and improvisation, choreography, and world dance."

Miranda ten Broeke, who trained with Vanaver Caravan

to late teens held at Stone Mountain Farm in Tillson, New York; it features training in diverse dance styles from ballet to flamenco. The Caravan Kids Summer Workshop, a five-day intensive for children ages 4 to 8, also at Stone Mountain Farm, gives children an introduction to world dance and creative movement.

Reaching out

Another significant aspect of Caravan Kids Project is its outreach program for K-12 kids in local public and private schools. "We work closely with teachers and principals to integrate dance into the social studies and language arts programs," says Vanaver. "They choose the countries they want to delve into based on mandated curriculum; or there might be a child from that ethnic group, or maybe they



Vanaver Caravan's *Earthbeat! A Journey* expresses people's need to harmonize with the earth.

from early childhood, developed and currently directs the Caravan Kids Project. "I don't think anyone merges live music and the authenticity of choreography for this extensive repertoire the way Livia does," ten Broeke says. "Maybe the coolest part of what we do is the educational aspect. We believe in approaching our teaching with a deep sense of respect and authenticity. It's all about the celebration of world dance and music. We give that to everyone, whether in the audience or classroom. It provides a visceral, grounded understanding of the art forms."

Summer intensives are offered for young kids and teens. SummerDance on Tour! is a 15-day intensive for ages 9

want to honor a student or teacher from another country."

When working with the school curriculum, Vanaver and ten Broeke have found third grade to be an especially effective time to work with kids, because that's when young students first focus on the world outside their own community. "We'll help the third-graders learn about a country, like Brazil," ten Broeke says. "Then Gustavo [Brasil], one of our brilliant dancers, comes in and teaches capoeira. If they're learning about China, we might teach them a Chinese ribbon dance I learned. I like to tell kids, 'You name a country, and I bet I'll know a dance from that country.' "

"China, Brazil, and Kenya were on the hit parade this

year," Vanaver says. "Japanese dances, the tarantella from Italy, and Mexican dances are also favorites."

Talli Jackson, a longtime Vanaver Caravan student who now dances with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, is impressed by the efficacy of the outreach. "Generally the students are excited by something new," Jackson says. "They get to move their bodies and interact with their peers in ways that are unusual in a school environment."

And teachers, pay heed: "It's often the boys or the kids who are the most destructive who are the stars of the



Vanaver Caravan is enriched by company members who contribute both their talents and their own ethnic dances.

program," Vanaver says. "The children also bond as a class. They perform together in a show for the whole school. People learn in so many different ways."

Vanaver has devised a program called Dance

WHERE TO SEE VANAVER CARAVAN

- February 14–16: Danceflurry, a festival of traditional music and dance, Saratoga Springs, New York
- June 21 and 22: Clearwater Festival, Croton Point Park, Croton-On-Hudson, New York
- June 27–29: *Streets of Gold* at the Old Songs Festival, Altamont, New York
- SummerDance! On Tour will take place July 28–August 17, 2014.

WORLD DANCE AT A GLANCE

A fascinating resource on the Vanaver Caravan website, vanavercaravan.org, is the DanceEncyclopedia, an alphabetical compilation of world dances ranging from Spanish alegrías to the Zulu Shield Dance. Teachers can easily see the source country, region, difficulty level, categorization as a solo or group dance, and whether it tells a story or is intended as a game. Click on "Arts Education," then "DanceEncyclopedia."

Kinnections, which has been funded by the New York State Council for the Arts and the NEA; it creates global dance festivals in which the kids perform the dances they have learned for children from other schools.

In addition, Vanaver initiated the India Project by partnering with Big Medicine Charitable Trust, a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Udaipur, India, that develops communities committed to peace and nonviolence. The partnership, Vanaver says, is "an opening up and creation of a common sense of unity. You have to begin building peace one class at a time, one group at a time, one school at a time."

During the pilot project in January 2012, Vanaver Caravan sent four teaching artists (including ten Broeke) to Udaipur to teach world dance styles and bring students of different castes together (a rarity in India because of the social restrictions of the caste system) to learn. The project will be repeated this month.

Strength and flexibility

In her dancers, Vanaver says, she looks for a strong ballet and modern background. "They also need to be flexible—not strictly married to any one style," she says. "They need a keen sense of rhythm and a generous sense of performing, and they have to be able to work with others."

Maintaining the stylistic integrity of the dances can be challenging, but it's a priority. "We work with the dancers to do the movement in the traditional style," Vanaver says. "Often we'll call in people whom we respect to help. To be able to perform these dances back to the cultures from where they came—that's the criteria."

Ultimately, promoting peace through experiencing other cultures remains the goal of Vanaver Caravan. "In every aspect of our work, peace comes into play," Vanaver says. "In schools, children learn a dance that at first seems strange or funny. Then all of a sudden it becomes beautiful, something they can appreciate. Whether it's through performing or teaching, when you can embrace other cultures and differences, the process of learning about peace naturally begins." ♦