

NYC dance troupe interprets refugees' love letters

By CASSAUNDR A BABER

Observer-Dispatch

UTICA — June 2010



Tears slipped down Lilliam Santiago's cheeks as her most intimate thoughts were interpreted and became woven into a series of graceful motions by dancers of New York City's **Buglisi Dance Theatre**.

"I love my country all single day, I remember all my friends, my neighborhood, my work," a dancer read from the love letter Santiago wrote as an assignment for her English as a second language class at the **Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees**. "Once I go to bed and put my head on the pillow, my first thought is about you, my country ...", the Cuban refugee wrote.

Two upper level ESL classes at the center submitted letters as inspiration for the dancers, who are completing a three-week residency at **Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute's School of Dance**, thanks to a **New York State Council on the Arts** grant. The troupe is using their stay at the refugee center to create new work and garner new audiences — including the refugees, students from area schools and dancers.

Forty-year-old Santiago's English might be broken; she might still confuse her verbs and forget pronunciations, but each word and all its passion became clear while she and about 40 of her peers watched the dancers interpret 15 refugees' love letters.

"I think sometimes when you're teaching writing, it feels like you're doing something extra — like the students don't feel like it's worthwhile," said ESL instructor Sharon Vogelaar. "But to have their feelings on paper and see their words through this universal language means a lot."

For Iraqi refugee, Aaeda Ismael, 53, the interpretation became especially meaningful when the dancers' movements showed similarities to the dances performed in her native land. "The dance reminded me of my home, my people, happier times," she said after showing the dancers and refugees a form of a native dance that included her arms circling above her head and snaking the through her body to her feet. The dancers swiftly formed a half-circle around Ismael, mimicking the movements. "Dance to me is peace and happiness, and I don't want this traditional dance to be dead."

During what **Artistic Director Jacquelyn Buglisi** called a rehearsal at the MWP AI Dance Studio, she asked refugees to read from their letters in their native tongues while dancers moved to the rhythm of their words. "Ewe wangu wa moyoni. Sulu hizi umekuwa sina hali kwa mawazo," read Fartun Ali, 22, in Somali. (Translated in English, the letter to Ali's husband, who she had to leave behind in Dallas, reads: "Dear sweetheart. These days the time I have only have thoughts of you.")

Only a few understood the words as spoken, but everyone seemed to understand the emotion created when a male and female dancer embraced, intertwined and twisted around each other.

"We as artists want to bridge the boundary through the universal language of dance," Buglisi said. "The love letters are very metaphoric." Metaphoric, because love, like dance, is universal, she said. That idea became especially apparent in the subjects of the refugees' letters, which were addressed to freedom, their native countries, loved ones and even music.

"They're torn between the love of their country, love of family, love of their legacy, and they come here to our country where they have the freedom that they've dreamed of," Buglisi said. "Isn't that what America's all about?" Ultimately, Buglisi said, spreading that message through dance moves it forward and gives it greater impact. "Maybe we're a small institution, but in a way it's a bigger message," Buglisi said. "The more we work with the community, the more impact we have on each other."

That impact will last long after the troupe leaves, said Nancy Long, who heads Munson-Williams' dance program. "Everywhere they go they are enriching our community," Long said of the dancers. "They're spending their dollars here; they're enjoying fine-dining throughout Utica. It's a complete win-win situation; and another situation where arts and economics make sense, and that what we're doing brings attention and focus and dollars to our community and to Munson-Williams, which makes me most proud."