

Global Water Dances: Advocating for Water Solutions through the Arts around the World

We live on a water planet: 70% of the Earth's surface is covered with water. But the vast bulk of that water, 97.5%, is salt water. The fresh water that humans need to live is far scarcer -not to mention all of the planet's other plants and animals that cannot survive without fresh water. Only 2.5% of the world's water is fresh water. And of that 2.5%, most of the world's fresh water is not easily accessible or available. A minuscule 0.4% exists in surface lakes and rivers, and as humidity in the air. A whopping 69.5% is frozen in glaciers, snow, and permafrost. And another 30.1% is in underground aquifers.

The United Nations has long recognized that access to fresh water is brutally unequal. Almost one billion people, roughly one person out of every 8, do not have access to clean water. In December, 2003, the General Assembly proclaimed 2005-2015 as the International Decade for Action "Water for Life." On July 28, 2010, the General Assembly passed UN Resolution 64/292, The Right to Water and Sanitation, declaring that the United Nations: "Recognizes the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights." The United Nation's figures show that unsafe water kills more people every year than all forms of violence, including war. As of 2015, about 1.8 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people to improved sanitation facilities.

Pressure on water is rising, and action is urgent. Growing populations, more water-intensive patterns of growth, increasing rainfall variability, and pollution are combining in many places to make water one of the greatest risks to poverty eradication and sustainable development. Floods and droughts already impose huge social and economic costs around the world, and climate variability will make water extremes worse. If the world continues on its current path, projections suggest that the world may face a 40% shortfall in water availability by 2030. The consequences of such stress are local, transboundary and global in today's interconnected world.

In response to these facts and issues, a group of movement experts gathered in 2008 and developed a project to create awareness about water using a more effective medium of communication than the verbal one: the body language. The project took the name of "Global Water Dances." The template would be based on Marylee Hardenbergh's project, "One River Mississippi," which connected seven sites along the Mississippi River in the United States through movement, performing altogether at the same time. Each location had a leader and a group of dancers performing the same dance structure: an opening sequence honoring the water, a locally choreographed work about a local water issue, a shared dance that every participating community would do, and an inclusive and empowering section that the audience could join. The challenge was now to make this project around the world, in every continent.

Global Water Dances was first launched in June 2011 and has been organized every other year since then. The Steering Committee, made up of Marylee Hardenbergh, Karen Bradley, Martha Eddy, Antja Kennedy, Gretchen Dunn, and Vannia Ibarguen, used their professional network and were able to recruit choreographers from more than 60 cities from the six continents that shared their vision. They performed their dances at rivers, lakes, beaches, parks, pools and other places related to water, bringing audiences and performers together in a single universal dance. Choreographers are encouraged to couple with traditional environmental education tactics: they organized panel discussions, invite scientists or environmental organizations for a speech, or even they organize call to action in the form of petitions, cleaning rivers or beaches, marches, and other forms of environmental activism. The performances are free of charge, so everybody has the opportunity to enjoy the performance at no cost.

Why using dance? Flow, the medium of movement, can connect the community, just as water connects people. Communities grew up around, and were often defined by, the water nearby. Movement provides a practice for community-building and can foster new understandings and behaviors. Global Water Dances connects the local to the global community to safeguard all humans having access to clean drinking water, to ensure that the water flowing through us is sustaining and not harming us. Taking responsibility for, valuing and protecting water can shift people easily into other ways of caring for the planet.

Global Water Dances raises the awareness of participants and observers about the importance of water, and provides a model for empowering local communities to take action. The Global Water Dances event brings local environmental experts and organizations, artists and members of the community together in a process that can build ongoing collaborations.

In working with local choreographers around the world, we draw on Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff's practices with human movement to mirror the universe's dynamic patterns, in a dance called the "Global Dance", performing the same movements in all locations. These local choreographers are empowered to create their own choreography called the "Local Dance" that teaches about their local water crises, and inspires imagination. Using Laban's technique of Movement Choirs, the choreographers create dances that will not only move the participants, but also the observers: at the end of each performance, dancers and audience members are intermingled in a "Participatory Dance", by teaching/learning a very simple sequence of movements, engaging people of all ages and abilities.

Local communities will be encouraged not only to dance, but also to find ways to take action to solve their immediate water problems. Each event will reflect the importance of water as seen by that local community and in the eco-systems we share.

Global Water Dances is also a model for how to use current technology to create, perform, respond and connect people from different parts of the world: choreographers are contacted through the web page, they also learn the Global Dance over the Internet, with music, video and written scores; all available online. They perform for a local community but also for the

world through online broadcast, and it is stored in our video repository for collaboration, peer review and response.

Global Water Dances advocates for Water in three different ways: inviting general public to connect, partnering with environmental organizations--we have a proven track record of educating parks departments, and ecological agencies to consider how performance can assist them in advocacy-- and teaching dancers to be advocates for social issues.

How can this event claim these effects? 600 surveys were made from four continents, and these are some of the results: 78% said the performance increased their interest in water issues and were inspired to take action; 68% were likely to make more efforts to conserve water in their personal use; and 75% brought sense of community and helped them to see the location in a new way.

Also, it generated a ripple effect: many brainchild and sister organizations are using the GWD model, and continuing working on water activism through the arts: Dance Ecology (Taiwan), Caudal (Mexico), Rio Danza Comunitaria (Peru), TREE (Bangladesh), GWD Bogota (Colombia), National Water Dance (Miami, Florida), Dance Alchemy (Baltimore, USA), Dancing Earth (USA/Canada), Marikina Theatre/Water Warriors (Philippines), Flood/Turn the tide (Hawaii), AgapeBelgium (Belgium), Eurolab, Moving on Center (New York, USA), Droplet Dance (Maine, USA), Global Site Performance (Minneapolis, USA), among others. Also, there are many ecological agencies giving their support, like Parks and Recreations (New York, USA), Sustainable Coasts Hawaii, Center for Global Environmental Organization.

Conclusions:

1. Global Water Dances promotes **ongoing** collaborations between artists, activists, and community members
2. Invites general public to connect with their own bodies and the environment
3. Partners with environmental organizations to enrich their methods of education
4. GWD is a platform for socially engaged choreographers who want to develop their art while promoting awareness and informing audience members about water issues

Sources:

- *Resolution A/RES/64/292. United Nations General Assembly, July 2010*
- *General Comment No. 15. The right to water. UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, November 2002*
- *Action Plan. United Nations High Level Panel on Water. September 2016*
- *Hardenbergh, Levinson and Bradley, 2016. Embodying Water Solutions. In: Godfrey and Torres. Emergent Possibilities for Global Sustainability.*

Vannia Ibarguen
Artistic Director
Global Water Dances

www.globalwaterdances.org
vannia@globalwaterdances.org

Vannia Ibarguen, MFA

MFA Graduate in Dance of the University of Maryland, performer, choreographer, and dance teacher. Her focus is in the interaction between performance and technology, and also the relationship between classical, contemporary and folk dance styles. She has been Communications Manager of the Peruvian Dance Council, IT consultant, and magazine collaborator/writer. She has received awards in United States, Peru, Argentina, Cuba, and Colombia. Vannia is the Artistic Director of Global Water Dances, an international initiative that raises consciousness on the critical need for safe drinking water around the world. Vannia is also founder of her own dance troupe called VIDA danza, and organizes "Encuentros de Pura Danza", an annual contemporary dance festival held in Lima, Peru since 2012.
www.vanniaibarguen.com