

When the WORLD IS YOUR STUDIO

Travelogues from three dance artists about trips to **Bali**, **Russia** and **Cuba**

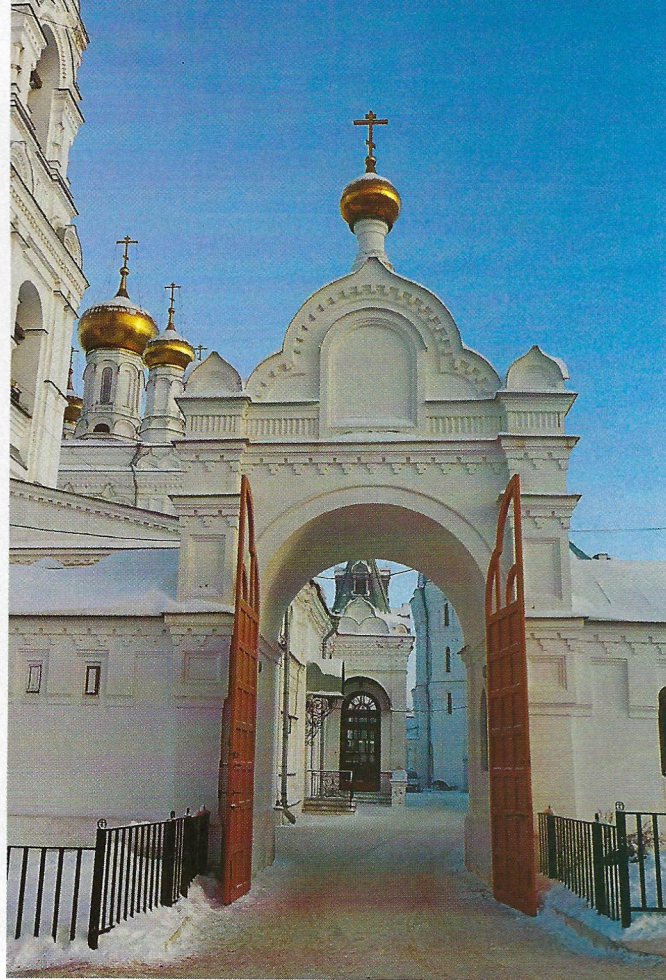
BY KRIS EITLAND

Teaching dance in a foreign culture can be eye-opening on many levels, for both young dancers and their teachers. We talked with three American artists about recent projects in Bali, Russia and Cuba. They spoke of the challenges and the joys, and shared helpful tips you won't likely find in travel guidebooks.

Cultural differences can make even simple decisions complicated, says Venetia Stifler of The Ruth Page Center for the Arts in Chicago, who has organized exchanges with China, Russia and Cuba. "You can read about these things, but it doesn't hit home until you travel and experience them for yourself."

And art is a powerful messenger. "As cultures evolve around the world," Stifler says, "dance remains the universal language to bring us together."





AROUND THE WORLD
 Clockwise from top
 left: Havana, Cuba;
 Holy Trinity Monastery
 Stefan, Perm, Russia;
 Pura Ulun Danu
 Bratan, Bali, Indonesia

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Epifano leads dancers in the village temple. Below: Welcome Dance by Guliang Kangin dancer. Bottom: American dancer Laila Giselle Skramstad at the sacred springs.



Kim Epifano

Founder and artistic and executive director
Epiphany Productions Dance Theater
San Francisco, California

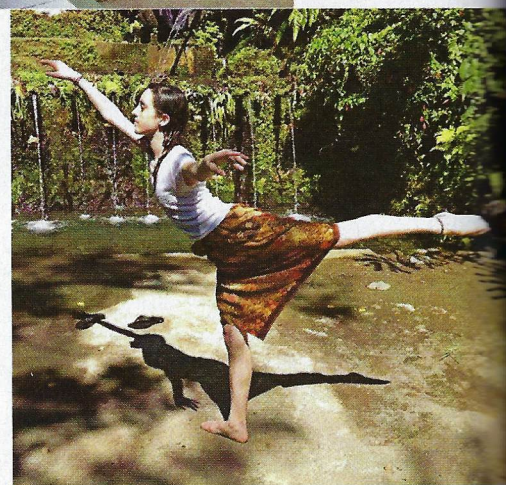
In April 2016, Epifano took 17 American teenagers from five states to the village of Guliang Kangin, in Bali, Indonesia, for a 17-day residency to learn and teach dance, theater and music. Epifano is co-artistic director of trip sponsor Mudd Butt International, based in Telluride, Colorado. She's led similar trips to Turkey, Ethiopia and Vietnam.

In Bali, Epifano's group taught their hosts *Stone Soup*, a dance theater piece based on the fable of tricksters who make soup from stones and celebrate generosity. In turn, the American group learned the villagers' traditional Welcome Dance and Rice Farming Dance.



“The kids change emotionally. We collect their cell phones when we reach the village. There is no internet. They live in someone's home. Art is the language, and they do a performance together, so that's bonding. They become pen pals and Facebook friends and weep when we have to leave.”

It's always a moving and spiritual experience, even in the difficult moments. Bali can be extremely hot; it's



challenging to sleep with just a little fan. We perform in a temple, the heart of the village. We wear sarongs every day to cover our legs. It's hard to walk up and down steps. They do holy rituals in the temple and we are respectful. It's tough dancing on concrete all day. The hard surface sends shivers up our legs.

Usually the Welcome Dance is done by young women and the Rice Farming Dance is done by men. We combine things so there can be boys and girls in dances. Gamelan [the traditional music of Bali, made by striking mallets on metallophones, gongs and other instruments] played by teenage boys is very moving and part of the show we make.



The dancers gathered daily in the Guliang Kangin village temple. Bottom: Balinese children demonstrate how to dance with one's eyes.



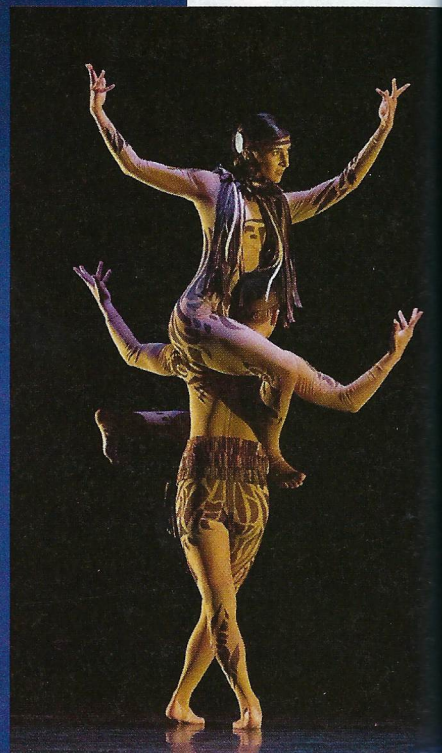
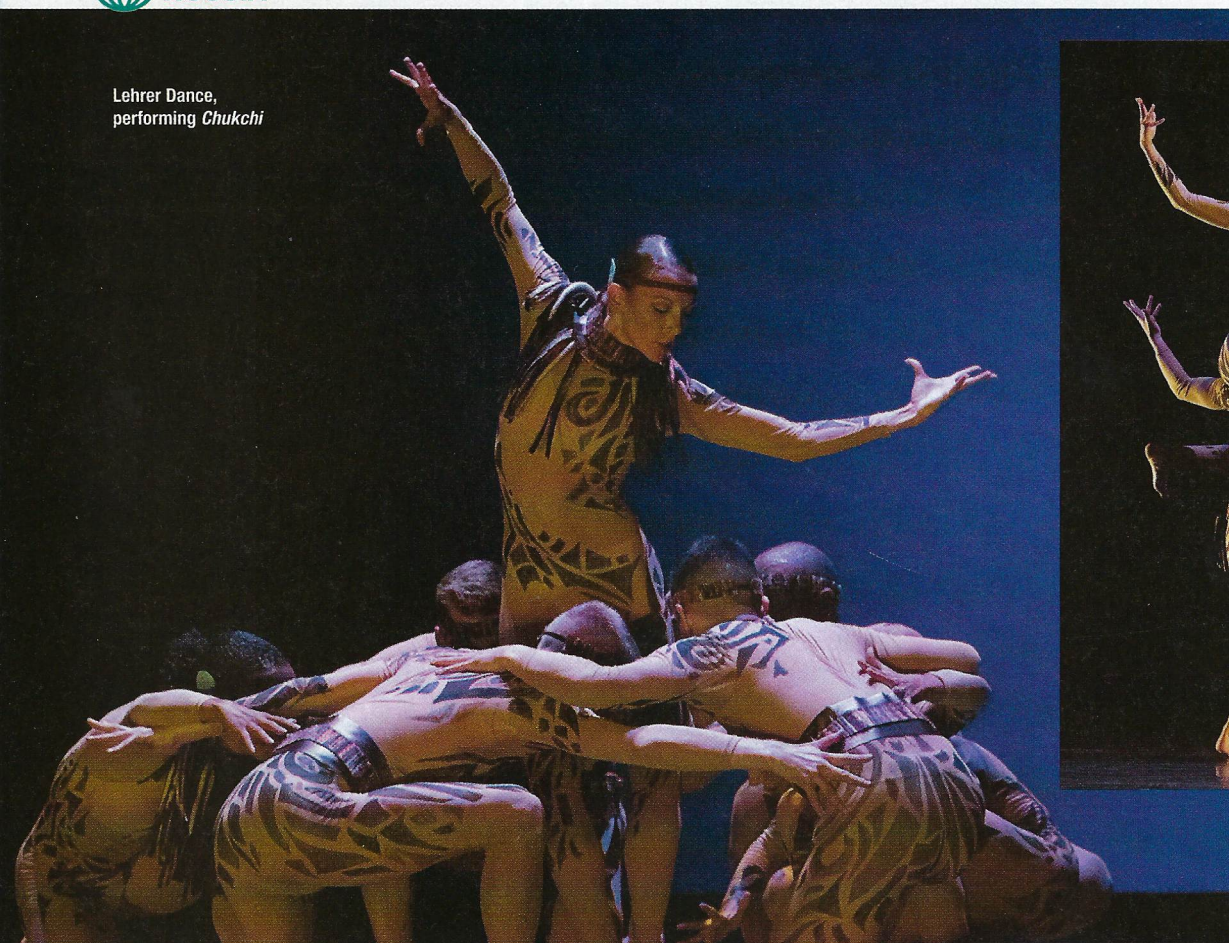
Language is tricky. Everything has to be taught in English and Balinese with a translator. You have to speak in short sentences and allow time for the translators. Scripts for shows are in two languages. The play [Stone Soup] has to move along with lots of dances, song and text that isn't too sprawling. We use props. Comedy is always a hit.

It helps to learn first names, simple phrases and to count from 1 to 10. We bring our own sheets and towels, and I leave them for our hosts. A single bed sheet is a lifesaver in the heat. I give gifts like cashews, music—even my shoes." They give us gifts, too."



Photos by John Trullinger, courtesy of Trullinger Productions

Lehrer Dance,
performing *Chukchi*



Jon Lehrer

Artistic director

Lehrer Dance, partner company of
University at Buffalo, SUNY
Buffalo, New York

In May, Jon Lehrer toured with his company of eight for two weeks in Perm, Berezniki and Yekaterinburg in the Urals, the mountains that separate Europe and Asia. They performed and taught at arts universities and a festival. Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the cost of all flights, hotels, local transportation and artist fees were covered. Past cultural diplomacy tours have taken the company to Vladivostok twice, Kamchatka and Anadyr, the easternmost Russian city.

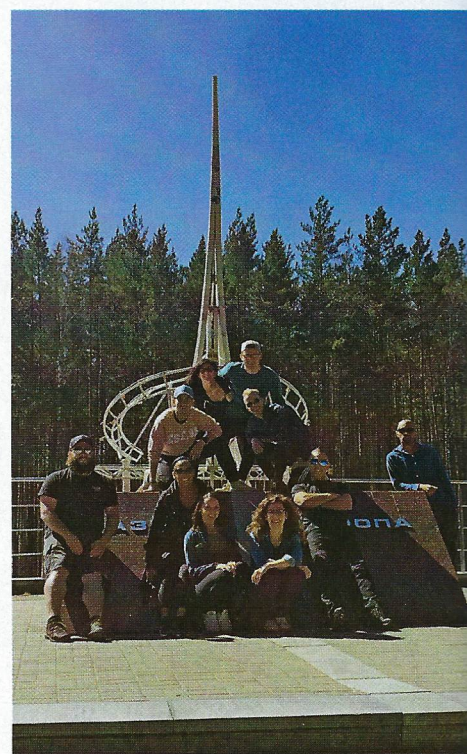
The Russian State Chukchi-Eskimo Song and Dance Ensemble, called Eygyron, performed for Lehrer and his troupe. As a tribute, Lehrer choreographed *Chukchi*, named for the indigenous people of the Chukchi Peninsula.

“We took a master class with the troupe from Anadyr, and it was intense. It started with a 45-minute ballet barre. They are serious. They have their own school and keep traditions alive through dance.”

It’s almost Native American dance, which makes sense because our Native Americans migrated. (We were across from the Bering Strait.) Everything from the waist down is ballet: pliés, tendus, all turned out. Everything from the waist up is Anadyr: arms like a reindeer or torso like a snake. We did animal movements across the floor. Jump like a reindeer. Move like an eagle and walrus. Imagine fishermen and hunters.

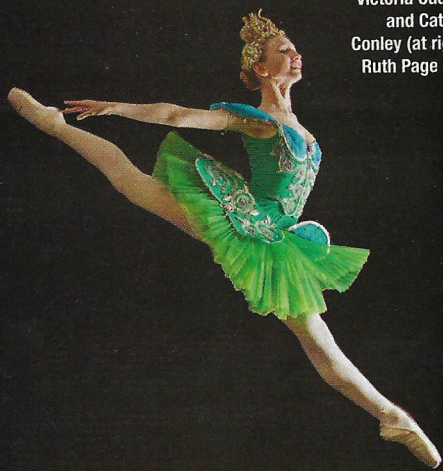
During our break in the Eskimo area, snacks were pieces of bread with caviar and hot tea; fish eggs for the refueling snack.

Our two countries are in strife. We’re in the arts. We are pro many things. Whether you agree or not, remember you are a guest. Wherever you go, stay humble and respectful. The Russians love to practice their English. They want to hear it.”



The company stopped for a break at the border between Europe and Asia.

Victoria Cudworth
and Catherine
Conley (at right) of
Ruth Page Center



Venetia Stifler

Executive and artistic director
The Ruth Page Center for the Arts
Chicago, Illinois

In October 2015, The Ruth Page Center for the Arts in Chicago took eight dancers, three teachers and a group of 30 donors to Havana, Cuba, as part of a cultural exchange with Escuela Nacional de Ballet de Cuba Fernando Alonso. Dancers lived in small B&Bs and studied eight hours a day (Cuban ballet technique and contemporary technique, and method). The visit culminated in a joint performance with the Cuban dancers.

“Cuba is very complicated and worthwhile. And now that we have an embassy there, it’s a bit easier, but you need an official invitation from someone in the country to start the process. We are lucky because our new director, Victor Alexander, is Cuban and he knew lots of people. Still, it took at least a year of research.”

We had Cubans come here first, which made a difference. They gave classes, and dancers interacted and became friends. We gave a joint performance in our theater. So we were ready to go to Cuba. We already had friends to visit.

It’s a different life. Cuban students live at their school. Their life is dance. American students are in a very high-quality school. Their life is pulled in many directions: family, school and dance obligations.

In Cuba, if you’re a dancer, that’s what you are for your whole life. In America, it’s not so clear. You may be a dancer or a doctor or a lawyer. It’s rewarding to see our dancers go toe to toe and kick it up when the Cuban students are here. They improve dramatically.” **DT**

Kris Eitland is principal writer and critic for Sandiegostory.com.



Photos courtesy of Ruth Page Center



Venetia Stifler and Victor Alexander present Ruth Page International Partner Award to Ramona de Saa (center), director of Cuban National Ballet School.