



InterPlay
unlock the wisdom of your body

Intercultural Encounters

Reflections by Gretchen Wegner

Gretchen just wrote this essay for her friend Prashant Olalekar, who is about to host his second Intercultural Exchange, bringing westerners to India to use InterPlay as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue. InterPlay is an improvisational arts practice that uses storytelling, movement, and vocal play to unlock the wisdom of the body. She teaches InterPlay now, and performs in the company WING IT!.

Fourteen years ago I came to India for the first time — a brainy 21-year-old on her junior year abroad. I lived with a Hindu host family in Pune, learned Marathi, and researched a paper about the famous Marathi play Ghashiram Kotwal. The project went so well that, a year later, I came back on a Fulbright Grant to study the use of folk forms on the contemporary Indian stage. This time I traveled across the country — Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore, Mumbai, Madras — spending time at the National School of Drama and interviewing theatre giants like Girish Karnad. I was proud of myself for being so young, smart, and adventurous. But I was also very unhappy. Something was not right.

What a joy, then, to return to India with InterPlayers in December of 2007. Instead of studying about art, this time I came as an artist. Instead of interviewing others about their creative vision, I got to share my own creativity with everyday people. Whereas before I was learning about folk forms from a distance, this time I was sharing the folk form of InterPlay — and enjoying myself immensely!

One of the things that made this trip so special is that I was able to harness the power of the internet to write about my experiences as they were happening. As a teacher of world history back in the United States, it was important to me to share my experiences, so that I was maximizing this opportunity to be an ambassador for intercultural understanding.

Here's an example of an entry I wrote on January 8, 2008:

“Last night we received such a treat! Brother Maxim, one of the Jesuits we stayed with, took us to a village where the Warli people live. The tribal people have a different sense of time that many of us city folk. For example, we arrived “on time,” but still we waited around for an hour while some young boys went to call all the families from the village. Slowly, as dusk fell and the stars came out (Orion’s Belt was directly over our head), we talked with each other as villagers arrived. Finally, they invited us into a building, lit lamps, gave us chairs to sit on, and then the explosion of sound and music began. The women sat in a corner and sang and smiled while the men moved in a strong, captivating rhythm. The tribals have an “animist” religion; rather than believing in all the main Hindu gods, they believe in the “gods of the environment.” So this dance was all about the fish and the trees and the grain. It was so powerful, and hilarious. During parts of the song and dance, they improvised little “skits” between each other, and teased the women, and everyone was laughing. Laughing while they prayed (because for them, dance is a prayer. No one ever prays alone, or quietly; always in a group, and always through song and dance).

“At the end, Brother Maxim spoke to the people in Marathi. (I was so proud of myself; I understood some of what he said; my language skills are getting better and better). He was telling them how beautiful their culture is, and how important it is that they keep dancing. There are many forces that are making it difficult for these tribal people to keep their culture. There is something called “Special Economic Zones” that make it legal for the government to take the tribal lands away from them (basically, turning them into slaves on their own land). In fact, many factories that make goods for people in America are made on these lands, and the tribal people have nowhere to farm. There are also the pressures that come with movies and other city culture; many young tribal people who become educated leave the village, or at least, take on western culture. The people need to hear over and over again how important and beautiful their culture is, and they also need political support so that they don’t lose their land.

“We were so inspired by the energy, passion, and care they expressed through their dance. At the very end, we told them that we had come because we are interested in intercultural interaction and creating world peace. The women were so grateful to meet Americans who care about peace, that they touched our feet as a sign of respect. (The common image of Americans here is that we like to buy things and we like to make war with others; they were shocked to meet Americans who are the opposite of this image).”

Here's another entry from an experience the very next day:

“This afternoon Prashant took us in a car to one of the slum areas of Bombay. We went accompanied by people from a nonprofit agency which works to empower the women of the slums to find jobs for themselves, so they don’t have to resort to work like prostitution. We met in a room with about 20 of these women who live in the slums. Their faces were bright, their clothes colorful, and I kept on thinking, “These women do not look like my stereotype of a poor person.”

“After some introductions, Cynthia stood up and asked all the women to copy her movements. For the next ten minutes, we did the silliest things together—shaking out our legs, arms, and voices; making wild gestures with our arms and funny sounds with our voices. The women, dressed in their colorful saris and long scarves and dresses, copied us, and we were all laughing and giggling. Then, we got into partners and did the Mirror exercise, where one person leads some gestures and the other person follows. It’s pretty cool to stand opposite a woman who speaks a different language from me, and has a very different life, and be the best of friends for 2 minutes while we lead and follow each other’s gestures. It turns out this woman is almost exactly my age, since she is born in 1973.

“When we were done being silly, dancing and improvising together, we asked the women how they felt. Prashant translated the Marathi. ‘Fresh,’ one woman said. ‘I forgot my worries for a short time,’ another added. ‘My shoulder pain went away,’ said a third.

“At the very end, we did an improvised blessing for them, throwing kisses and whooshing sounds over them with our outstretched arms. Spontaneously, they blessed us back, standing and ‘whooshing’ their arms over us. It is amazing how connected you can feel to people just by dancing and being silly.”

At the end of each entry, I asked students to comment on what they learned. I was so gratified to hear these American students making so many connections about the relationship between east and west, dance and spirituality, and oppression. Here are some of their reflections (please keep in mind that these are Caucasian 12-year-olds living in suburban America):

“That is so cool that they don’t pray without dancing or singing. That’s cool that you have also progressed in your language. That is also cool that they got to improvise while praying (it’s like having fun and praying).”

“It is terrible that the indigenous tribes are the ones who are having their land taken from them. I can see how embracing western culture would be a very tempting for a tribe that is so oppressed. It’s cool how dancing and praying and singing are all intertwined.”

“I think that it is pretty neat that they are always dancing when they pray. Sounds fun. It is like to pray is to bring joy to yourself. Sounds cool. Too bad that their culture is slowly being destroyed; it is probably a valuable thing to hang on to.”

It strikes me that all intercultural encounters create ripple effects that emanate outwards, often much farther than anyone realizes. As our small group of Americans and Australians traveled through Gujarat and Maharashtra, we created ever widening ripples of connection, affection, compassion, and joy. In this way, the simple act of traveling and playing together makes us Ambassadors of Peace.

Read the complete blog <http://www.gretchengoesindia.blogspot.com/>

