



Allyne Gartrell, Atlanta Dance Connection transmit healing power of dance





Courtesy of Allyne Gartrell, Credit: Crystal Power

Allyne Gartrell, Artistic Director of Atlanta Dance Connection, and company artists shifted their focus to online sessions that gave viewers many options to dance while sheltering at home this spring.

Gartrell is looking straight into the camera with an intense gaze. Both hands are clasped together behind his head. Gartrell looks as if he is reclining into a spatial diagonal, yet still standing.

June 1, 2020

Volume 1 Issue 2

By: Julie Baggenstoss

Allyne Gartrell, artistic director of Atlanta Dance Connection, had big plans to celebrate the company's 10th anniversary season — a multi-state tour and a gala performance set to take the stage in May. But with the onset of a pandemic this spring, theater closures and stay-at-home orders dashed Gartrell's plans, and both the tour and gala had to be canceled. Gartrell then looked for ways to serve dancers in the present while strategically considering options for the future.

Gartrell, now three months into online classes, explained that reaching out through a new platform was necessary for his company and the residents of metro Atlanta. "In the time of crisis, history reveals to us that the arts and dance are a healing property for the community," he said. "Providing spiritual strength, joy and hope for new possibilities, dance provides us a realm of artistic possibilities and allows us to continue to dream."

As a touring company, rather than a dance school, Gartrell faced the challenge of finding ways to work off the road and out of the studio. "It began to make us think outside of the box, in creating content that could be universal to everybody," said Gartrell. Company dancers appeared in online classes for the community, broadcast via Facebook Live, as a way to stay in shape and keep "people from going stir-crazy."

As a pleasant surprise, the classes attracted the attention of people who had never before heard of Atlanta Dance Connection. The company added new audience members and found a new marketing channel in offering outreach online, which underscored the fact that dance heals. "Artists are ready to lift the burden that the pandemic has put on the community," Gartrell said. "Dance is that stress reliever. It is that positivity in something that is chaotic."

Gartrell also hoped the classes would give the public an idea of what the company does on a day-to-day basis. He formed the company when he returned to metro Atlanta in 2010 as a way to serve emerging dancers, as well as those already established. His vision is that

Atlanta Dance Connection would be a platform for Atlanta's ambassadors of dance. As the pandemic exploded, the organization had expanded to two performing companies; it has been recognized locally and regionally for excellence. Social distancing struck a blow to that trajectory, but it also exposed some of the magic of the work to people who might never have seen it otherwise.

Online classwork covered the genres that Gartrell has combined in company repertoire: African, jazz, ballet, hip-hop and modern dance. Two days a week in March, April and May, Gartrell took to social media to present dance classes with his assistant Torrance Smith Jr. and company artists Alyseia Darby and Chelsea Long. Out of all the dancers on screen, viewers at home could decide who made the best role model or follow all of them. A third weekly session titled Happy Hour was dedicated to more informal dance and talk time. LeVon Campbell, company manager, joined the mix, as three generations of men discussed dance in a variety of contexts besides technique and the studio. They also responded to comments made by viewers, altogether creating a banter that made dance approachable and served as a reminder that dance is for everyone.



Courtesy of Allyne Gartrell, Credit Crystal Power
Allyne Gartrell, Artistic Director of Atlanta Dance Connection, says dance has a reputation for healing in crisis, and he is ready to dance at home or on the road.

Gartrell wears a white shirt and is sitting in front of a white background. Gartrell is an African American man with long hair styled in small braids, some of which are dyed bright blue. Gartrell's big brown eyes stare sweetly at the camera. He warmly smiles into the camera as both of his hands gently caress the right side of his face.

Dancing in transformed spaces may have been one of the biggest connections that this group made while they established themselves online. On Sundays and Fridays, they danced in what could have been anyone's living room — a space infused with dramatic lighting, hints of a disco ball and portable ballet bars. Thursday evening sessions happened outdoors by fireside on a sprawling deck that invited a good stretch or a strong leg extension to fill the evening air. The homelike surroundings, combined with the artists' enthusiasm, surely inspired viewers to push aside furniture and dance.

In addition to working in online classes, Atlanta Dance Connection dancers are preparing to open the company's 11th season Nov. 12-15 at Fulton County Southwest Arts Center. As a special event during that weekend, the company will at last present a single performance of its 10th anniversary gala concert.

The emergence of and reaction to the pandemic has left a sense of uncertainty about the future that will have a lasting impact on dance in Atlanta. “Everyone is terrified – not because of what has happened, but because we don’t know what to do next. It is difficult to try to plan for the unknown,” said Gartrell of his colleagues who work in dance.

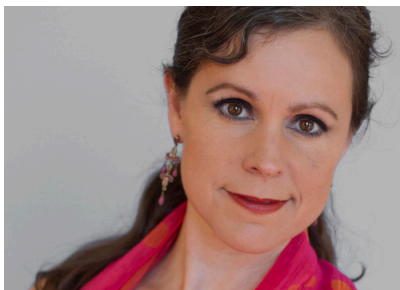
This is a time of trial and survival since funding is limited for dance studios, companies, pick-up troupes and part-time performing groups. “It is really going to be a testament to the companies with the wherewithal to stick in there where it is necessary,” said Gartrell.

Always an optimist, Gartrell said, “Dancers are going to find a way. They are going to put on a show in the park, in the driveway. They are going to put together a concert in the living room. And, then there will be a new costume. We create positivity.”

[Atlanta Dance Connection](#) has a new class schedule for June 2020.

Attend free classes via [Facebook](#) Sundays at 1:00 p.m. EDT.

Allyne Gartrell leads the classes with company artists.



Julie Galle Baggenstoss is a scholar and frequent lecturer in the field of flamenco history and culture. She has an M.A. in Spanish from Georgia State University, where she analyzed flamenco through the lens of Spanish history, literature, and linguistics. She is the Executive Director of A Través, 501c3, dedicated to flamenco arts in the state of Georgia, and she is a founder of the Atlanta Flamenco Festival. In addition to performing and working with students in grades K-12 as a teaching artist, Julie teaches flamenco at Emory University.

More by Julie:

[Nadya Zeitlin creates in listening and leading](#)