

Sam Gill: Bringing the world to Boulder

by Janine Gastineau

Dance helps us comprehend something absolutely fundamental about what it is to be human. Trying to articulate that is my theoretical challenge at the moment. I have this really powerful conviction now that those parts of us that are most deeply human are powerfully connected through dancing.

— Sam Gill

Professor Sam Gill is an ambassador of dance. He has studied forms from hip hop to Lindy Hop, the traditional dances of India, Bali and Java, and dances of Latin American and West African nations. By offering culturally-based, multi-arts, Gill helped revolutionize the functioning of the typical commercial dance studio in Boulder. This broad approach has also altered the way he teaches his students in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Colorado.

The agent of this change: Gill's personal self-discovery through dance. Learning to dance changed Gill's life, and he believes in its power of transformation.

Gill, born during the baby boom, was a farm kid who grew up in a small Kansas town. He went to college on a math scholarship, and switched to business his senior year. While working as a systems analyst at the Coleman Company in Wichita, his growing concerns over the ruthlessness of the business world led him to the academic study of religion at the University of Chicago. Earning a master's degree and a doctorate from Chicago, Gill taught religion at several colleges before settling at CU-Boulder's Religious Studies Department in 1983.

Despite the lofty ideas and philosophy that accompany Gill's vision, something more prosaic provided the life-changing impetus. Fifteen years ago, wanting to become more fit, Gill enrolled in a low-impact aerobics class at The Pulse Gym in Boulder.

"I was an academic's academic. I would spend most of my spare time reading, and I loved to teach but that's all I did," says Gill. "Dancing became one of the most important things in my life. I was discovering my body, and myself as a body, and that was so fun. I became obsessive with it, wouldn't miss my daily fix."

Aerobics eventually led to cardio-funk, which led to hip hop, and then to Lee Klinger, founder of the now-defunct studio Dance West, the first Boulder studio to offer master classes with celebrated national

and international hip hop dancers and teachers. Gill worked with Klinger to bring San Francisco-based dancer/choreographer Ken Jimernez to Boulder. Jimernez, who eventually moved to Boulder to open his own dance studio and company, Motion Underground.

In 1998, Gill opened his own dance school, Bantaba (Mandinka for "dancing circle") World Dance & Music, envisioning a gathering place where people could exchange their artistic gifts — including the very American forms of swing, hip hop and jazz — and through the arts promote a greater understanding and celebration of diversity. This family-owned-and-operated business — his daughter Jenny Gill, co-directs Bantaba, and his son Corbin Gill serves as multi-media designer — offers classes in dance from the African Diaspora, Middle East and Latin America, as well as African drumming and three styles of yoga.

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xylophones, drums, cymbals, and flutes.

As professor of Religious Studies at CU-Boulder, Gill had been teaching ritual studies and Native American religions since the early 1980s. As he simultaneously continued to study dance on his own, a bridge between his two passions of dance and teaching began to form. One summer, using CU's "Introduction to Religion" class as a platform, Gill taught a world dance class, putting together a

massive amount of readings on dance from various world cultures. During the second summer of the class, Gill says, someone told him "I know this dance"...so we moved the chairs back and got up and started moving. And I realized I knew there was something missing — we're not dancing. So that developed into the Religion and Dance class I teach now."

Gill began inviting people in to share their culture's

dances, until eventually he and his students were spending half the class time on their feet in dance studios throughout Boulder. "I realized there's an enormous wealth of talent and cultural knowledge right here, and guest artists that come through, and with other resources I now have, I bring guests here," currently from West Africa, India and Bali.

This approach brought an integration that Gill had been searching for in his teaching. "The connection between dance and religion seems a weird one when we come from a Western religious perspective," Gill says, "but once you step outside of that, the question almost doesn't exist, because the connection is so obvious. Even though dance and religion are almost synonymous in cultures throughout the world, most students who come to my class say, 'Whoa, why would you put religion and dance together?' Yet throughout most of the world, they are."

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Like Naropa University and the Colorado Dance Festival before it, Bantaba has helped change the cultural and racial landscape of Boulder, by bringing in visiting guest artists to Boulder's largely affluent and homogenous community. Last August Bantaba presented its first West African Dance and Drum Festival, which attracted hundreds of students and artists. This past May, the studio unveiled a free community Gamelan performance. This Indonesian musical ensemble consists primarily of percussion instruments, including bronze gongs and/or kettles set within intricately carved wooden frames, plus bamboo

xylophones, drums, cymbals, and flutes.

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"Religion and Dance" has remained a popular class since its inception, filling to capacity every semester since the mid-1990s. Maria Kim, Colorado Dance Festival founder, served as Gill's teaching assistant in the fall of 2000. "Each semester," Kim says, "Sam Gill gets 90 college students to fine their minds and bodies by introducing them to scholarly ways of thinking about dancing, and getting them to try it themselves. He takes them on an international journey, starting in Africa and ending in the U.S.,

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helping them to see that European-American based postmodern dance is as 'ethnic' as the dances of Ghana. He does this with a fabulous array of videos and readings, in addition to the teachers he brings in."

As Gill got to know the artists he brought in -- artists often working and living on a shoestring, or adjusting to life in a new culture -- it became clear that he needed to open his own dance studio. "These people can't really come to the university [to teach]," he says. "The university isn't open to people who aren't academically credentialed. And dance programs in this country are largely Western, largely modern and ballet with a token 'other.' So I thought, I know these people, it seems possible to bring them together, form a community that could then have this marvelous vision, that could be a real contribution to the situation of the modern world. And at the same time, appeal to people's needs for fitness, for local community, for entertainment. All those things are not to be denied as important as well, but for me there's a larger, grander goal."

"I was also looking for a way to serve the community, and asked myself, how could I make a difference and use my own talents in a way that is meaningful to me? The more I studied dance and the arts as they relate to religion and culture, the more I thought, this is the perfect way for people who are different from one another to appreciate one another."

Bantaba offers social programs several evenings per month: the Tango Dance Party, Hip Hop Culture, Africa Night and Baladi Night, a Middle Eastern event. They all offer a place for social gathering through dance. In addition to the West African Dance and Drum Festival in July, Bantaba has added classes in Afro-Caribbean dance and music, and will eventually present a Latin Dance and Music festival.

Bantaba's newly opened International Market features crafts, clothes, music and jewelry from several cultures. Bantaba also offers courses, lectures, films and discussions to extend the cultural awareness into other forms.

Dancer Nancy Cranbourne, who teaches Jazz dance at Bantaba, says "I really appreciate Sam's passion about bringing all these different cultures in dance together, and having a real home for them in Boulder." "He has a big vision," adds Brian Dunn, who has taught Argentine Tango at Bantaba with Deb Sclar. "Because of Bantaba's welcoming environment, the visiting teachers, especially those from Africa, bring an infectious enthusiasm for spreading their music and culture. This makes everyone enthusiastic for the culture they're trying to spread. It's been an ongoing pleasure and privilege to work with him."

Bantaba sponsors several artists-in-residence, from postmodern dancer Michelle Spencer to contemplative dance pioneer Barbara Dilley (see TAP, Dec. 2000/Jan 2001, Vol. 2, Issue 6, page 7), MA Dance and Logo

Legi ensemble and several others. All receive generous amounts of free studio time to create or rehearse.

Dilley, founder of Naropa University's dance program, says, "Sam Gill is deeply committed to the power of dance and music throughout the world to bring goodness, peace and joy to all of us. His respect for the diversity of traditions that shape dance in other cultures has much to offer us in our increasingly complex world. His appetite for dancing and music making in all its forms seems endless. Sam wants more of us to dance and enjoy the great pulsing spirit of community joined together in embodied delight."

Dilley touches on the central focus of Gill's dance philosophy. As Gill himself puts it: "We can't think of mind without body. We are bodies first. For me, that means how we are as bodies is who we are. I'm an entirely different scholar because I dance and move all the time." Gill believes that different cultures -- their religious beliefs and rituals, their art forms, and how all these relate to human behavior -- can best be understood when learned holistically. Absorbing cultural information through academic study is only the beginning.

Can Bantaba avoid the cultural colonialism so many Americans, in their quest for meaning, fall into? Bantaba's mission to offer several art forms from a particular culture, along with lectures, films, and its International Marketplace, seeks to combat this, but Gill knows it's hard to escape turning something into the exotic "other." He's observed guest teachers from other countries adapting their classes to the Western order: beginning with warm-ups, then facing the mirror, and last, moving across the floor. He and Jenny Gill encourage the international guest teachers to simply do things the way they would back home.

But Gill admits the whole issue is larger than that, and Bantaba, like everything else, has work to do in getting it right. In a city like Boulder, what does it mean when local exploration of the arts of different cultures is being done largely by white people? Can cultural exchange exist in this environment?

Gill feels clear about his purpose, both at CU and through Bantaba. "In the post-September 11 situation, I think we're wanting to see everyone like us, with this approach of 'You're w/us or against us; if you're not like us, we don't like you.' To me, appreciating difference is the clue to a peaceful world."

"If we talk about religion or politics or economics directly, these terms turn into violence and war instantly. But the sharing of the arts, in particular the embodied arts is a fabulous way to really know another culture and experience the people on some level. To see people from another culture and to know them at a personal level, in a way that embraces them because they are different, not because they can come like we are, that is really important to me as well."

For more information, contact Bantaba at 303.499.6484 or visit www.DancingCircle.com

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