

Cross Connections Ballet Company:

An interview with the directors, Cédric Lambrette and Constantine Baecher

By Gunild Pak Symes

Seeking to foster creative exchange and an international platform for emerging choreographers, two corps de ballet members of the Royal Danish Ballet head a small but diverse touring group of freelance professional dancers from various European dance companies and produce an annual choreography competition and showcase in Copenhagen, Denmark. *Dance For You's* Gunild Pak Symes sat down with the two directors, Cédric Lambrette and Constantine Baecher, to find out what inspires and compels the duo to push on with their artistic goals and visions in the founding and development of their eclectic Cross Connections Ballet Company, now in its second year.

DFY: Tell us about yourself and what led you to the work on stage you are doing today.

Cédric Lambrette (L): I was born in Belgium where I started dancing before going to the Paris Opera Ballet School for five years, where I did all my courses. Afterwards, I went to the Hamburg Ballet School for one year and did the theater class. They oriented me to the Royal Danish Ballet (RDB) where I have been working since 2002, for seven years... with the corps de ballet. I have been quite happy here. I've done a lot of work... 'Pas de Quatre' in *Swan Lake*, 'Pas de Trois' in *Manon*, a couple of Bournonville divertissement, and a lot of creative works, like Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *L'Homme de Bois* (for RDB), plus working with several modern dance choreographers. It's pretty interesting. RDB has a really diverse repertory; that's what I like about it. We do a bit of everything. I enjoy working here and living in Copenhagen. It's been fun.

Constantine Baecher (B): Well, I came from Walnut Hill (a boarding school for the arts in Massachusetts, USA). I went to Walnut Hill as a theater major (since) I was so sure, when I was little, that I wanted to go into musicals and drama and all of that. Walnut Hill, as you may know, works as a kind of (academy)... you have academics in the morning and major in an art form (to take classes in during the afternoon). It goes from about 13-18 (years of age).

It was there that I discovered ballet in a big way. I had done a little bit here and there for musicals and "Dolly Dinkle" kinds of things on the side of tap dance, but never in a serious way. At the time, Michael Owen took over the dance department. He was a principle at ABT (American Ballet Theater) and was a big influence on me, an incredible artist in many ways.

When I asked to transfer to ballet, he said, "You're too old to do it seriously. If you come, it's no days off, no summers off" — because I was almost 15 — "it's go-go-go intensely." So, I spent the years at Walnut Hill until I finished high school and spent the summers at the ABT summer intensive program in New York. When I graduated, I went to the same two-year theater course (as Cedric did) at the Hamburg Ballet School, that's where we met.

Like a lot of people in the dance world, I never imagined that I would wind up in the company I am in (RDB.) It was a total coincidence, but here I am and am very happy. I have always known that I am not the ideal ballet dancer, but I'm hooked on ballet, and I wanted to come to a big, classical company to experience what that's like. In that way, this is the perfect place for me now.

DFY: Tell us about the history and mission of your company, Cross Connections Ballet Company...

L: Cross Connections Ballet, how did that start? We talked a lot about it... Constantine has been choreographing and doing small pieces. I am not a choreographer, but I have always been

interested in the production side, the directing side of working dancers and choreographers and putting things together. I had been running similar projects in Belgium. Once a year, my father and I would organize a ballet performance or something like that.

Actually, my parents were ballroom dancers. I started as a ballroom dancer, too. My mother also does folkloric dance. She is a teacher. Dancing was not a full time job (for them) but they have always done it. I started as a junior ballroom dancer, and my partner, Joanne Allen, is now a world champion. She's coming to Denmark this year for the European Championship in Aarhus.

So, organizing things, like little (performances), trying to find a choreographer to work with... that has always been something I enjoyed, and something I would like to do when I finish dancing... like directing or creating a company. The idea came slowly to do Cross Connection, though there are similar groups to ours in Paris. They do a lot of performing in their free time. That's a bit of how the idea came. We discussed what Cross Connection Ballet should be. Why should we want to put one more company of freelance dancers on the market? We thought our concept of Cross Connection was good and wanted to see if it could go somewhere. For the moment, we have been running for a bit more than two years (since) September two years ago.

B: The catalyst, the thing that made us start it was that they (RDB) weren't able to schedule the (choreography) workshop that year, in which anybody from the company is allowed to make a piece and show it in one of the studios here. The last time we did it was in Takkelloftet (a black box theater at the Opera House in Copenhagen) — totally informal. That was 2005, and since then, there has always been a scheduling conflict. Even before then, it was on some years, off others. I spoke to Henning Albrechtson (deputy artistic director of the RDB) at the time, saying, "We always enjoy this so much. Is it possible to fit it in again this year?" (and he said) "No, it isn't, but why don't you organize something?" and I laughed not thinking he was being serious.

You know when you're young you think... "I would do things this way, I want to do things that way, I want to work with that person, or experience this thing..." In a big company like RDB, things are very focused. We're constantly preparing to go on stage — you have to be extremely professional and single-minded. We always thought, wouldn't it be fun, in our vacation time, to take a group of people that are nothing like us, and play around, experiment, try out totally different things? That's the mentality Cross Connection grew out of... now it has more of a performance angle. It's not only, let's all get in a room and see what happens... but it is based on the idea that we are going to assemble people with all different backgrounds, different outlooks on the art form, to learn from each other.

L: I think it is also important, (at least) for myself, to see, to learn, it's a learning process... how do I make an application? How do I make a production? That, for me, is all part of it, and I like that... hiring technicians, finding where to print posters, trying to find money... I think it's really fun. Running this also gives me a good back ground to be able to maybe run a major dance company in the future. For me, this was (the) "why". The director of the Göteborg Ballet, Johannes Öhman, is doing well, and he started just like us.

B: He ran 59 Degrees North (featuring soloists of the Royal Swedish Ballet).

L: He had his group, and from there, learned how to run a company.

DFY: Yes, you really can't learn these things out of a book...

B: That's like a lot of things in the dance world. It's also true in choreographing, creating ballets. There's no course you can go and take; that's a little bit strange, because most other art forms do have that. You can go and learn the rules to be a composer; you can go to a royal art conservatory and become a painter. It doesn't mean you'll be a great artist, but there is a syllabus.

There's no real syllabus for choreography, especially in ballet. And so, it becomes even more important that you have some venue where people can take chances, take risks, without being in a situation where their next commission depends on the success of the current work. Most choreographers under a certain age are in that position. Someone sees a spark, but if their first work isn't good, there's no second chance. Choreographers need a kind of venue to let that out.

DFY: Is that really true?

B: It's not that black and white as I painted it, but it's a slippery slope.

DFY: It's brutal...

B: Well, the whole arts world is brutal. (laughs)

DFY: I guess you can't become a success over night. Even Balanchine choreographed hundreds of ballets...

B: And how many companies did he form before New York City Ballet? It takes a lot of risks. Also, dance is a collaborative art form, which is wonderful, but not when you've got to pay these people's salaries, find a studio, find an audience, find a theater, and if you want it to look like more than a very rough sketch, you need lighting and costumes... It's incredibly expensive compared to being a painter, say, who can go off on his own and be a wild, crazy artist on his own time.

DFY: You said that Cross Connection Ballet is a freelance company. Can you speak a little more about how it works? It's not just a pick-up company... you actually have regulars...

B: It's like a flexible company.

L: It is flexible. In the beginning, we thought about just having a name and hiring anyone...

B: Well, not anyone.

L: No, no... but we decided to focus on certain dancers. People we have a strong connection with. We asked some dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet to join our project, and they laughed. Two years ago, it was like a cyber-company... just a website. There was no money. We did not know if there was going to be any performances. They said, "Yeah, sure." So, we did a photo shoot, put up pictures on a webpage designed by a friend. It started like that. I think we have been lucky with meeting the right foundation, the right people at the right time to help us with funding the project.

The Nordea Foundation is helping us for a second year. We did our first project last year. By a miracle, we got the funding, and our dancers really went for it. They wanted the experience, and I think that everybody had a great time. We had a chance to meet a lot of great people at the first (choreography) competition. Some of them are now members of the group, and I think we'll continue to grow all the time. I'm sure we will grow again this year.

Of course, it is a freelance company because it's not a full time job. We have full time jobs. We are working for the Royal Theater. This is a side project. It is something we can do during vacation, free time, and therefore, has to be freelance. We can only rehearse and perform when we have the time.

B: The people we choose, obviously, are professionals. I don't want it to sound like anybody is welcome. There is a bar. We have to feel as directors that there is a level of talent that we are excited by. We also look for a diverse group. The point is the opposite of a ballet company where you want a corps de ballet of beautiful people in line and symmetrical, with the same quality of movement. We want people all over the map, no two the same. For us, there's the finished product side of performing, putting what we do in front of an audience and standing behind what we've created, but our initial objective is the playground feeling, being in the studio. And to take the most advantage of that as possible, we need other people there to learn from. Not teachers in the sense that we have one person on top that comes down and says, "Now we will learn this, you will learn that, and you will learn it from my book." We sit in a circle, or we go to each other's rehearsals, trying to pull out what we can from one another.

L: Learning from each other... we're looking for quality. We want to present the best.

B: Yes, we want to learn from the best. (laughs) Though we don't want to learn from somebody who does what we do already. We want to learn from someone who's different in outlook and background and inspiration.

DFY: Tell us a bit about the people of Cross Connections... some of the choreographers and dancers.

L: We have Adi Salant who is a fantastic dancer and choreographer. She has done a couple of productions in Denmark. We really believe in Adi, and she has a great potential as a choreographer... her quality of movement is very interesting. She has a lot to teach us.

B: She's mostly been a teacher. She's been the assistant to Ohad Naharin (artistic director of the Batsheva Dance Company) for years. So, from that point of view, she is the most senior person in the ensemble. She teaches us Gaga class. Gaga is the technique that Naharin developed at Batsheva in Tel Aviv (Israel). She stages his works and teaches his technique at major companies all over the world, NDT (Netherlands Dance Theater), Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet (in New York City), and many of the big contemporary companies.

L: It was really fun last year to have Adi performing with us – her own choreography, a fantastic solo. She was also teaching Gaga class and doing warm-up for the dancers. It was really fun.

B: It also raises the bar for us to have somebody of her experience, that's important. You can't be satisfied with where you are... there is always somebody that is better than you, further along, who you have to strive to catch up with, always.

James O'Hara is another. He is working with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui now, and used to be in Ballet Preljocaj, under artistic director Angelin Preljocaj in Aix-en-Provence (in France). He's an incredible instrument with an incredible ability to move. The range of flexibility... I don't even know how to describe how he moves... or what kind of technique it is...

L: He has a technique that is correct for him. I've never seen anyone working or moving in the

way that he does. He's Australian, and he studied there. We met him at RDB where he was the assistant for Sidi Larbi when I was working with him on a creation for RDB. We were both French speaking, so something started there—a friendship started—and we had the project. So, we gave him a call and asked if he would like to come. It was an added bonus that he came with a solo from Sidi Larbi, because Larbi is one of the biggest names at the moment, and we really like the technique...

B: It's exciting to have something that's really cutting edge... you feel with James that what he's working on is going to be considered the hallmark of the 2000s for the next generation... To be there and see it developing in front of your eyes is a huge privilege.

L: Sidi Larbi and James... it is like a present... Being able to have a piece like theirs in the repertory and have James on stage is incredible for a young company. The audience last year went mad when they saw it. We toured to Belgium, and he got a five-minute standing ovation in the middle of the program. Many people in Belgium don't know modern dance, and he has a way of touching the audience. This year, he'll be presenting the solo again, and he'll be working with the third place winner from the competition last year, Madeleine Lindh, who is Swedish. She's really talented, and we are looking forward to working with her.

B: This is where Cross Connection is great, because we met James here by chance. James knew Madeleine from an earlier project. Madeleine co-choreographed the piece that won third prize last year with a dancer she knew in England, Joseph Walkling, both of whom are coming back this year.

We invited three people back from the choreography competition, Edhem Jesenkovic who is now working with Tim Rushton (artistic director of Danish Dance Theater in Copenhagen) plus Madeleine and Joe. We knew Edhem slightly from being in the Copenhagen dance scene—it's not that big. He's done some things with Alexander Kolpin at Copenhagen Summer Ballet. The piece he did for the competition just captured us, and obviously, it captured the judges; they gave it first prize. We are excited to have all of them back. They are not similar to each other; they are not similar to us; so, they are absolutely ideal.

DFY: Can you speak a bit about these dance genres... ballet, modern dance, new dance, contemporary... because it sounds like you are choosing choreography and choreographers who are crossing borders...

B: I think these genres are important when describing things that have happened and are being continued, but as in every art form, 'genre' mean less and less every day. It used to be that there were big streams you could follow clearly... the romantic period, the classical period, the post-modern period... now there are so many thousands of splinters that it's... You have names for things so that you can understand what people are talking about. But the names don't mean much. I can't tell you the difference between modern dance, contemporary dance, post-modern dance and Tanztheater. I mean, I really couldn't even begin to tell you what's what...

DFY: I guess we need to leave that to the dance historians now...

B: But they don't even know... they will give you an answer, but it only works for a certain artist, then you pull up another artist, and they go, "Oh, well, he's a gray zone... He's a little bit of this and little bit of that." So, I think it is important to know history, know where lines come from, what people are blending, what lineage they are continuing, but we've got to realize that titles are not as clear as they used to be.

DFY: We talked about programming, what you do as directors... what informs you? Is it intuitive, a feeling?

B: It's never only intuitive. I would say the first level is intuition. You look at something and react, but that will only take you so far. You've got to plan; you've got to think about what would be the best combination of pieces, what would be the biggest stretch for the artists involved, and what is the goal of the particular project... Then there are the other considerations: will we be taking this on tour, in which case, we will need to take into consideration cost, transport, whatever goes along with that... will this going to be a one-off situation, such as a site-specific work?

L: It depends also on where we are going. If we go to Belgium the audience may not be familiar with dance. There, we'd do a program that will have a mix, some ballet, some modern, maybe something in between; every member of the audience needs to be able to enjoy what we're doing. When we went to Belgium last year, we did a Tarantella (from Napoli by August Bournonville). The audience loved it, but they also loved James in Larbi's work.

B: We had a friend here who called it, "Tapas dance" — that you have many, many little courses, and they add up to a whole.

L: Though that is easier to do... In the future, we want to make a full evening, a full length work. We also want to be able to do 20-minute ballets in a triple bill. It takes more time to create those works. For the moment, the repertoire is based on pieces of five to ten to 15 minutes.

DFY: Is there anything that you don't like... anything you don't want to do... what really turns you off?

B: You know what I don't like? When somebody comes into the studio and has an answer for everything.

DFY: Choreographically?

B: Or a dancer, who says, "I know how to do this." I think that is very antithetical... it's against the mentality of Cross Connection. I am not interested in learning from somebody who has only answers. I am interested in learning from somebody who is interested in learning.

For me, there is a sort of artistic gulf right now. I think, like a lot of art movements, there were huge geniuses breaking ground in the 70s and 80s. People centered around, say, Forsythe...it's hard to find a dance performance today without some influence from William Forsythe. I don't think Forsythe's focus was on how do we take what was classical technique and evolve that a step further. I think he was so into this idea of the infinite possibilities of dance, different styles with thousands of ways of moving joints, parts, shapes, lines and angles. It's almost pulled everybody else to what his path was.

Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater mold is also having a big influence now.

DFY: But you both are of a new generation of dance artists. Do you know what your generation is called?

B: I think we are going to be named by the next generation. I don't know if we get to name

ourselves... “The Cross Connection” generation? (laughs)

L: I hope so! That’s what I was going to say, but I thought it would be too pretentious. I hope we are. Our goal is to discover a new generation of choreographers, a new generation of dancers.

B: I wonder if there isn’t a deeper thing, that the idea of apprenticeship in art, following traditions... I wonder if that’s not changing fundamentally. Take Pina Bausch; she was a protégé of Kurt Jooss, and though her work is not like Kurt Jooss,’ when you look at *The Green Table*, you can see the development. Same thing with Christopher Wheeldon; his work looks much more interesting played next to a Balanchine ballet, compared with playing it next to a Martha Graham piece. I wonder if that whole protégé thing isn’t unraveling. Influences are so varied now. You turn on YouTube.com now, and see a thousand different people’s work. It’s not as concentrated.

L: It’s about working together. It’s not going to be individual... it’s a group effort.

B: It’s also the way people learn. We learn from so many sources now instead of having one professor.

DFY: This is true. It used to be that you would study under one teacher for ten years.

B: I think that was true for choreographers as well. They would have one advisor, one person that that they studied under.

DFY: A mentor... and then one may find after ten years another mentor. But nowadays, you have several mentors at the same time — at school or a workshop — all different, and teaching different things, and often these mentors do not agree with each other.

L: That could be a positive thing.

B: I don’t think it’s positive or negative. It’s just a major change in making art. Maybe that’s why you see these splinterings now.

DFY: There are also so many more distractions now... for artists, for audiences... the media, the movies, television, the internet, online events, gaming... how do you reach and maintain your audience?

B: Gaming... Dance gaming... that would be fun... how to make the perfect ballerina...have her do 20 pliés...

I don’t know... maybe something is lost. I remember the two years I spent in Hamburg learning under John (Neumeier). There is something about having a mentor that’s an incredible experience. Maybe you don’t need it for a lifetime, but a period of going in depth. I think that’s an incredible thing. Don’t know if it’s Cross Connection’s thing, but...

DFY: I do think this is a very important thing to say to young people, young dance artists. Some say they don’t feel that they should stay with one thing, with one teacher, too long. They want it all, and so, they are not good at anything. They know a little bit about a lot of things, but not really one thing well. Artists notice that they don’t have a lot of patience or a long attention span.

L: I am not a choreographer, I am a dancer, but I have discovered by working with people like

Sidi Larbi that I am inspired, and learn best from people who are unique and going with what they feel. Of course, Larbi has a varied background in street dance. I find that he's someone who is coming out with a style that hasn't been done (before).

B: At some point with exceptional talent you have to settle down and focus. Then, you create a company that is nothing like Cross Connection. You give that person your undivided attention, 24 hours a day, for years and years and years, to see what develops. Like what Jiri Kylian made of NDT, and I am sure Sidi Larbi is forging in his productions. Cross Connection is a bridge into that. We are trying to fan people's spark. We are not the company that they will stay with for 30 years perfecting their craft, to become a great artist. We're a training ground.

L: For the dancer and the choreographer, we are one of many experiences they will have. We are happy they are sharing a couple of weeks, a couple of months, a couple of years with us. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.

B: We hope that it's a great experience for everybody because the dancers are top level. There are incredible people in there. If we do our job right, it should be a wonderful experience for the choreographers to get to work with people who are talented and dedicated, while still questioning. For the dancers it's a chance to feel movement, feel different ways of moving, different people's ideas of movement. It's healthy, it cleans the palette. Performing is wonderful, but you start to lose your soul after you are under that pressure. You have to be careful that you always keep the artistry alive, that you keep the fire burning, and that it doesn't become a factory. Things can't be black and white all the time.

L: We learned a lot from the audience last year. We didn't know what reaction we would get, and it was wonderful. The dancers were having a good time working together, and the audience could feel that. We are all doing this because we like to, we want to, not because we have to. Cross Connection is not something we have to do. If a dancer does not want to do a show, that's fine.

B: We don't hold that against them. We choose different people from the ensemble and people from the outside for different projects, there's always a flow.

L: Each performance is different depending on where we want to go. Sometimes we do this choreography, sometimes we use that artist... we're always keeping our eyes peeled for inspiration.

DFY: Tell us about your annual choreography competition... what's the format... what are the prizes?

L: The international choreography competition and showcase. In the showcase, choreographers don't run for prizes. It's only to present their piece. It's opening in Copenhagen. This year, it is at Stærekassen (a stage attached to the Old Stage theater). Last year, it was at Camp X. This time it is a bigger stage with better facilities for the artists. We take around 10-12 choreographers... no more than that...

B: Because we've got to keep it live in one evening.

L: The prizes are 20,000 DKK, 15,000, 10,000 and 5,000 DKK... small prizes. It's not meant to be a huge amount of money, though this year it is double what we offered last year. We want to keep the event focused... it's an opportunity for dancers and choreographers to stage their work in front of an audience and members of the dance world, rather than a chance to run after a prize.

We welcome everyone to Copenhagen, give them a place to stay, but they have to fly from where they are coming from to present their work... something still has to come from them.

The competition is one evening with five to ten jury members. Last year, we had Nikolaj Hübbe, director of the Royal Danish Ballet, Kenneth Greve, director of the Finnish National (Ballet), Tim Rushton, director of Danish Dance Theater, Åsa Söderberg from Skånes Dance Theater in Malmö (Sweden), Adi Salant, and Sorella Englund.

B: Sorella stages Bournonville ballets across the world.

L: That was last year's jury. This year's jury is not yet finished, so we can't announce it yet.

B: Some old faces, some new faces. We are very happy we've gotten some high level people to agree to sit on it. That has been a really pleasant surprise that, for the past two years that we've been doing Cross Connection, people have shown a lot of interest. For us, Cross Connection is the most important thing in the world, but it is wonderful that other people are interested as well.

L: And how people understand what we're doing.

B: Yes, they've been incredibly encouraging.

L: Artists understand. We hope that we'll have the same success as we had last year because people who applied to the competition had similar ideas about dance and how to work as us. I find that people understand where we want to go and what we're doing.

DFY: And the audience?

L: It was difficult to get the audience in to see Cross Connection Ballet last year; nobody knew about us then.

B: Well, it was our first performance.

L: This year, I hope that it will be bigger.

B: The great thing last year was that we got a wonderful audience response... much better than we had anticipated. One of the judges from last year told us, it's not the number of people that come, it's the quality of who's there — that calmed both our nerves... and it is true. The people who were there were not necessarily arts watchers, an arts audience, which is an aspect we haven't spoken about yet...

The flip-side of our project, the workshop and the ensemble shows we do with Cross Connection, is that we try to attract an audience that isn't the typical dance audience that's already invested. We want to try and bring what we do to a new set of people. Last year, that went really well. We will see whether this year, they will all come back and bring their friends. I have a lot of faith that they will.

L: Now, for us, the most important (thing) is to build an identity. I know we've been talking about the competition, but for the ensemble, it is to create a history together. We would also like to be invited around the world to present our choreography, and present our dancers... to festivals, private theaters, so that is something we are going to start working on now... trying to get people to know about us, what we do and what we stand for.

B: Another reason we're repeating the competition is that it turned out to be a great format for what we are trying to accomplish. By the nature of what it is, it brought together people who have similar interests and goals. It gave them a chance to meet, get to know more dancers from different countries and different mentalities. They get to see each other's work. It's a wonderful combination of arts, and social (networking) to make an event. And arts audiences are into an event. You need something to grab onto. In this case, it's a winner. For us, the winner is not important, but I think that (the audience) enjoys it because they get to cast a ballot, to have their opinion heard...

DFY: You mean like a "People's Choice" award?

B: Yes, last year, they were sort of the seventh member of the jury. And I think that is important to engage your audience, to find a way to get them involved.

DFY: Well, nowadays, they are also more used to interactivity and participating in voting on the internet...

B: ... it gives you a reason to get involved. You can't sit back and let the world go by now, or even the performance go by.

L: It's a friendly competition. Yes, there is a prize, but the real prizes should be discovering something new, meeting people. For us, we are winning anyway, because we are meeting all these people. Even if they don't win, they are having a good time, they are presenting their work... and maybe it will lead to other opportunities. We are joining together (to meet, learn, and discover), that's what we want, and that's what the Nordea Foundation is looking to support.

B: We should also say that the Nordea Foundation has been incredibly supportive of us, I mean, unbelievably supportive.

DFY: How did that happen? How did you get the Nordea Foundation on board?

B: We contacted a whole bunch of foundations last year, you know, when writing, applications to foundations, going through the big book and seeing who you sort of fit into by motto or creed, who they are looking for... We sent Nordea a big package asking, "Hey guys, do you want to fund this up-start group and give us our 'Go'?" They said yes. They sent this a very short one-page letter that said, "Go for it. We'll give you everything that we can to help." It was unbelievable.

L: I didn't believe it was going to work, being a foreigner in Denmark, sending an application in English. They were looking for an idea that fit their expectations — a project that would bring people to Denmark to meet and work together.

B: They came to the event last year. I think that clinched the deal for this year. They were really happy with it and told us as soon as the curtain came down, "If you need us next year, we're there for you." It's beyond our wildest dreams.

DFY: Anything else you would like to share with our readers?

L: Just (that we're) dancing, dancing, dancing, and we hope that people want to see us. We're still

waiting to see what comes out of it all.

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For more information, please visit: www.crossconnectionballet.com