



Robin Becker Dance toured Vietnam with *Into Sunlight*.

## When Dance Heals

Hofstra professor Robin Becker brings a dance of reconciliation to Vietnam. **BY RACHEL CALDWELL**

A group of dancers charges across the stage, a frantic flock of bodies running to the building intensity of drumbeats. Suddenly, the stage is transformed into a virtual battlefield: The dancers duck, dive to the floor and cover their heads, launching their bodies through space. Later, they come together downstage center and stand in a final moment of unity to face the audience, as if in defiance of the horrors they've just endured.

These images are from choreographer Robin Becker's *Into Sunlight*—an evening-length work about war. In September 2015, Becker and her cast of 16 dancers toured *Into Sunlight* through Vietnam for 10 days. Though she had reservations about how the work would be received in Vietnam, Becker hoped it would be a healing experience. The tour coincided with the anniversary of renewed diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam.

### A Citizen Artist

"I tend to take on big topics," says Becker. "I believe in an artist being relevant to their time. I heard Yo-Yo Ma describe himself as a 'citizen artist.' I love that phrase."

When she isn't making work for her contemporary dance company, Robin Becker Dance, Becker teaches at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. A dance educator for 40 years, she teaches technique classes, choreography courses and a somatic practice called Continuum Movement. She has balanced her roles as an educator and artistic director successfully for 29 years, setting 30 works on her company to date.

### Out of Darkness, Into Sunlight

Her impetus to create *Into Sunlight* came in 2003 when the U.S. went to war with Iraq. "I was so heartbroken," she says. "I felt that I needed to make a statement." She found inspiration in

David Maraniss' book *They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967*, about a devastating ambush of a U.S. battalion and a student protest at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The book's insight into the experiences of the survivors and the deceased's family members deeply affected Becker.

"I became aware that many of my students had no idea that wars were going on, nor were they very interested at the time," says Becker. "Because of the educator in me, I wanted them to become more conscious." She selected a group of Hofstra students to dance alongside her company members and got to work creating *Into Sunlight*.

### From West to East

After reaching out to Maraniss, who was eager to help get the project off the ground, Becker and her company were able to meet with some of the people featured in his book. The author even arranged for *Into Sunlight* to premiere at UW–Madison in 2011. It was RBD executive director Gloria Hage who saw the healing potential of *Into Sunlight* and felt that it should be performed in Vietnam. Since 2015 marked the 20th anniversary of renewed diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, it seemed the ideal time to embark on a tour of the country. A Vietnamese artist Hage knew connected Robin Becker Dance with Vietnamese modern company Together Higher, and the two companies decided on a joint tour through three cities to promote healing and reconciliation between their respective nations.

In September, Becker and her company set out on a 10-day tour through

Hanoi, Ha Long Bay and Ho Chi Minh City. Becker also taught a master class at Vietnam Dance College. "It's a platitude that dance is the universal language, but my experience teaching there, especially with such a language barrier, was the deeper truth of that," she says. "It was such a beautiful experience to feel the common bond of movement and how clear a language it really is."

### The Power of Dance

The response to *Into Sunlight* was phenomenal—the shows in Vietnam were completely sold out. "Seeing young people trying to embody a historical experience that is still continuing today really touched a lot of people," says Becker. Perhaps most rewarding, though, were the discussions that arose. Performances at UW–Madison, Hofstra University, and, later, the United States Military Academy at West Point and Vanderbilt University were followed by talkback sessions with the company, audiences and Maraniss. "They were opportunities for veterans to give voice to their experiences," says Becker.

As for the future of the work, "my hope is that this would be universal," she says. At press conferences in Vietnam, Becker was occasionally met with resistance by reporters. "They often grilled me about, 'Why are you coming to Vietnam with this piece about war? Do you only think about war when you think about Vietnam?'" she says. "I would just explain to them that I didn't set out to do a work about Vietnam. I set out to do a work about war and conflict in the world." She hopes to bring the piece to other countries, and a documentary film about *Into Sunlight* is in the works, set for release sometime this year. **DT**

This page: photo by John Mantiaci, courtesy of Becker; opposite page: by Ron Honsa, courtesy of Becker



Becker (in blue) surrounded by students of Vietnam Dance College