

# May I Borrow?

by Elizabeth Johnson

*30 teens. 2 weeks. A lot of dance.  
A lot of braids.*

**H**er given name is Pang Houa-Vang, but everyone calls her Cherry. She is a lively 17-year-old, a first-generation American living with her family in Minneapolis. She studies and performs the traditional Hmong dances of her native culture and can hold her own when she hears a hip-hop beat.

She is one of the many, many extraordinary young people we encountered in the 15 cities and four years of the *Hallelujah* project. In communities across the country we asked the question, “What are you in praise of?” Responses ranged from the first cup of coffee of the day to the first light of the new millennium. Responders included Vietnam vets and pacifists, reverends and rabbis, those who had never performed and professional artists, the very old and the very young. We found people eager to tell, and to move to, their stories. The young people, who savored the chance to be listened to and to create with others, were particularly responsive.

When the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Company left Detroit, we said goodbye to Lydia and the Liturgical Dance Collective, Edgar and the All City Men’s Dance Ensemble. Then we met Cherry in Minneapolis through the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women. Later we met Valerie from the Boston Arts Academy, and Scott the skateboarder, and Scott the breaker, and Olivia, and hosts of other memorable adolescents. Meanwhile,



Photo by Stan Barouh

back home in the metro D.C. area, the Teen Exchange teens were developing original pieces with themes ranging from September 11th to teen magazines. We knew we had to get all these guys together to create with their diverse skills and experiences.

With the help of the Surdna Foundation, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange launched the National Teen Institute and last summer 30 teens from across the country gathered at University of Maryland for an intensive two weeks of dance and composition classes, rehearsals, and creation. They were African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian. They studied diverse dance techniques, from jazz and modern to salsa and

“I would like to borrow your laughing god.”

traditional Hmong. Some were dramatic, some were shy. Some skateboarded, some studied the Bible. Some liked hip-hop, some liked punk. And despite or maybe because of their differences, they really wanted to like each other.

## We Explore “Borrowing”

When Dance Exchange was in Los Angeles during the *Hallelujah* project in 2001, a Christian minister said to a Buddhist monk, “I would like to borrow your laughing god.” In the *Hallelujah* performance, we created a structure where dancers from our intergenerational, intercultural dance company performed movements from Taiko drumming in a square dancing reel structure. When two dancers encountered each other they asked, “May I borrow your \_\_\_\_\_,” before continuing the dance.

We borrowed the concept and made it our own. On the first day of the National Teen Institute, we asked teens what they would borrow from a political leader, a pop star, a teacher, and Elvis Presley. We

*Teen participants from Minneapolis were all members of the Association for Advancement of Hmong Women.*



Photo by Stan Barouh

*Teens from Maryland, Minneapolis and Detroit perform in “May I Borrow?”*

asked them to make a movement for each word of their response, creating an equivalent visual expression of the sentence in dance.

When we encountered the word “borrow” in the sentence, teens realized that the movement needed to begin and end in the same place. They said, “The thing about borrowing is you have to give it back.” Students shared the same movement vocabulary for shared words and created their own movements for their personal responses. They taught each other their movement responses to the question and learned each other’s movements. By the end of the day, each student had phrases of shared and borrowed material. And they knew something about the people they were dancing with.

Cherry and seven other girls from Minneapolis arrived the second day. Class was starting, and we realized we had sent their luggage with their dance clothes ahead to the host families. With no prompting, teens started offering to share clothing with total strangers. “I have a top that will fit you.” “Here’s some pants you can borrow...” Within minutes everyone was outfitted and ready to dance.

That evening at a potluck, the Hmong girls started talking to the Detroit girls about dancing that day. They commented about how much happens in the lower part of the body in the Afro-Haitian style of the Detroit girls’ movement. Cherry started demonstrating the intricate, delicate hand movements of the Hmong tradition. The next day in class, Lydia from Detroit taught everyone the lower-body movement of her rhythmic foot phrase, and Lisa

and Cherry taught “peacock hands.” Then we put the two together. The lower body and upper body moved in completely different but complementary styles. This became a metaphor for the teens in their time together, in and out of the studio.

Throughout the Institute, teens borrowed from each other’s cultures and created their own culture that was about sharing their differences. They could be seen in their off-time teaching each other salsa in the courtyard, playing eclectic

music, and doing line dances. The African-American girls started braiding hair. Soon, they were braiding blonds, brunettes, males, and silky Asian locks. When the workload got too much, they started teaching others how to do it. The cornrows became an unspoken uniform, a process of informal connecting.

### From the Personal to the Poetic

In classes, participants articulated what they would like to borrow from each other. They said things like, “I would like to borrow your right to vote.” “I would like to borrow your living grandparents.” “I would like to borrow your unique style.” Then they danced together in a series of lifts and support sequences. We created a piece that raised questions about what is okay to borrow, and what is sacred. “Toothpaste, but not toothbrush.” “My friends, but not my boyfriend.” The teens discovered it is okay to borrow ideas, but not without asking. They created an environment of mutual respect.

In a few days, we created a piece that included their writing, dancing, and definitions of what it means to borrow. The multi-layered work had gymnastics, personal stories, popular music, and quiet moments. It demonstrated the beauty in blending ideas. Concurrently, Liz Lerman and the Dance Exchange Company rehearsed with guests from multiple *Hallelujah* sites for the final *Hallelujah: USA*. The week following the National Teen Institute, teens joined the professional company and guests from across the country in a massive performance to perform a segment of their piece *May I Borrow*.

The teens moved beyond an “everybody is the same” mentality without pointing out and objectifying differences. They adopted, modified, and personalized shared information. They developed friendships through a process of connecting, literally, with each other. In an era when young people are so often labeled violent, apathetic, or obstinate, we witnessed an alternative picture of young Americans: mutually respectful, engaged, cooperative.

At the end of the Institute, everyone returned home with new skills—and braided hair.

*Elizabeth Johnson is the Teen Exchange Director and a Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Company Member in Takoma Park, MD.*