

Lam and Warfield seek to make a difference through their stage performances

Expanding the meaning of art

By Eric Tang

SOMETIMES, when people focus on life intensely, they strive so much for career success and stability in their personal relationships that they fail to relate to the rest of the world.

Artists Allen Lam and Thomas Warfield note that this phenomenon seems to be particularly common in big cities. Indeed not only high-powered financial experts or politicians suffer from this self-imposed isolation.

"Everyone seems to have built a wall round oneself. No one wants to be approached especially in a place like Hong Kong or New York because we don't want our busy schedule to be messed up," Lam says.

He adds that even artists, who are supposed to be more sensitive to humanities, also fall into the same trap.

"Like at the early stage of my training as a dancer, I focused so much on developing my techniques that I almost ignored other forms of art practised by other artists."

What makes Lam and Warfield feel differently now has a lot to do with Warfield's trip to the south of China four years ago.

"I saw this little girl playing on the sand in China. At first she was so frightened because she hadn't met a black person before. Then I started drawing on the sand by her doodle and we gradually developed such good rapport without uttering a word. When I went back to the States, I suddenly realised how important it is to feel connected and how race, sex class and everything have isolated us."

This need to connect the isolated individuals again inspired him to set up Peace Art in New York. The organisation's first project was to

invite different people to write a poem about peace.

Contributors included prominent artists such as Leonard Bernstein and phil anthropists such as Mother Theresa. Since then, Peace Art has continued to invite artists, talented in different areas, as well as under-privileged people, to collaborate in their creative process.

Lam came to Peace Art when he was studying in New York and agrees that the work done by the group has changed his outlook on life and art.

He admits he used to have difficulties even working with his musicians.

He saw that his refusal to compromise was certainly his major weakness.

"After having worked with other artists I then realised accommodating other people's ideas does not necessarily mean I'm sacrificing my own. It's a moulding process with lots of people approaching your life and enlarging your vision."

Lam also adds that his co-worker in Peace Art, Yin Feet, who is a sculptor, helps him appreciate his own culture and incorporate it in his own works. Working with her also helps me understand myself better, Lam says.

Warfield also agrees that he has benefited from his work experience with Yin, explaining that as a dancer he understands the limitations of his body as a tool for expression.

She, however, can chisel her way round and create new forms. Her visual images in-

spire me to create a lot of new movements."

Often, artists in Peace Art contribute ideas to each other and collaborate conceptions. Then they take the idea away and translate it into their own form of art.

"Working with professional, amateur artists and non-artists allows us to have unlimited space for exploring the arts," Warfield says.

Neither Lam nor Warfield see their projects doing any community a favour. Instead, they believe they have benefited much from the interaction with the

wide range of people in the cities they have been working in.

"We want to recreate a sense of community and raise people's awareness

They agree that their current works often reflect social issues or take social problems into account.

on how we are connected to one another. The group is not doing any form of human service, but we do believe in the benefit of our work to people. I personally certainly feel my internal growth through my work for Peace Art," they say.

This sense of growth also shifts the artistic focus of both Lam and Warfield from the pure aesthetic concern to the substance of their pieces.

"By reaching out to the community, Peace Art makes me realise art is more than just performing on stage," Lam says.

They agree that their current works often reflect social issues or take social problems into account. That is not to say they have turned their art into propaganda.



BODY AND SOUL: Thomas Warfield, right, expresses himself through dance.

"Throughout history dance has been used as propaganda. In the 40s and 50s dance was used for political propaganda. But a propaganda is designed to win people over. Our works are not about winning people's sympathy to donate money to the needed," Warfield says.

Besides, we do not exploit emotions. We hope our works might trigger some thoughts or make a difference at the right moment."

Warfield recalls when the group was performing in Salt Lake City and an alcoholic wife-basher wrote to him later telling him how the show had changed his outlook on life and how he had redeemed himself since then.

When Lam returned to Hong Kong, he founded Dance Art which is similar to Peace Art. On Saturday, 22 April, with Warfield Yin and two other artists Andy Wong and

Almond Chu, Dance Art will stage a multi-media show at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts Studio 1.

The show will include dance, exhibition and music.

"Lam has been actively organising workshops with some disabled children and some of them will participate in the show. It is lovely to see how everyone can be included in such activities of art," Warfield says.