grants from across the world who looked different from one another and spoke different languages and understood the world differently—for her, culture was a continuous process of mixing and reconstituting. Her aunt was a bharatanatyam dancer, and watching her perform, Jehlen recalls, was like a “religious experience.” Jehlen went to Brown to study something “very Brown,” she says, a self-directed major called “Storytelling and Survival: Ritual and Performance as Guardians of Culture.” After taking time off to dance in India, she enrolled at Harvard Divinity School in 1997 to learn Persian and study Sufi literature (and to access Harvard’s dance studios). She founded ANIKAYA—a blend of the Hebrew an (gift), the Persian i (of), and the Sanskrit kaya (body)—around the same time, as a vehicle for her various dance projects.

Jehlen says she always knew she was born to dance, and her career has combined the styles she learned growing up with genres from Japan, West Africa, and those of the many dancers she has traveled around the world to recruit. She calls the work “dance diplomacy”—but resists the concept of “fusion,” as though it were a process of randomly gluing together elements from different genres.

“It’s important to me to learn something so thoroughly that it becomes part of your body,” she explains: to understand how each dance form uses the body, the deep relationships and symbols and meanings behind every movement and gesture. Humans are wired to be moved by dance, she says, but that doesn’t mean dance is a “universal language.” When Jehlen creates choreography with her partners, she emphasizes, “It’s not about the superficial aspect of the art form. We’re meeting at the core of the art form, not at the, ‘How do you move your hands?’”

The evening-length Conference of the Birds begins with its eight dancers (each from a different country) moving across the stage in full-bodied, synchronized flight, their arms evoking something between avian and human—as powerful and light as a bird’s wings. In the background, projections fill a screen with sketches of birds, text, and pieces of passports and visas, representing the violence of borders. The poem on which the show is based, by Farid ud-Din Attar, tells a story of traveling, traveling together, and human—as powerful and light as a bird’s wings. In the background, projections fill a screen with sketches of birds, text, and pieces of passports and visas, representing the violence of borders. The poem on which the show is based, by Farid ud-Din Attar, tells a story of traveling, traveling together, and of the necessity of all...