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Expanding the territory

Beverley Glean, Rosie Lehan and Judith Palmer of IRIE! dance theatre hit the APD training trail

For a quarter-century IRIE! dance theatre's ethos and mission has been to raise the profile of the practice, and the practitioners, of African Peoples Dance (APD). Our work has delivered some groundbreaking initiatives. These including establishing a style that fuses African-Caribbean and contemporary dance; co-coordinating one of the first partnerships between a dance company, a Further Education (FE) college and a Higher Education (HE) institution to produce the UK's first Diploma and Certificate course in APD studies; commissioning the first research into the setting up of an archive for APD; and establishing the UK's first Foundation Degree award involving APD. The company's most long-term objective has been research and development that addresses the place of African and Caribbean dance in formal education, professional growth and accredited training.

To succeed at this range of projects requires belief, commitment and stamina. They will often take unexpected turns and produce surprising outcomes, all of which has been true for the Dance and Diversity project. The aim of

this work is to research equality in dance and, by continually raising awareness, place African and Caribbean dance forms on an equal footing with other established techniques. Dance and Diversity was designed to take place in three phases. The first researched the position of African and Caribbean dance in the UK through a series of projects, interviews and a final seminar event involving young people, dance teachers, professional dancers, funders and academics. The second phase researched best practice in the USA, Jamaica, Cuba and Ghana, while the third involves the production of research findings and the staging of an international conference to take place in 2010. The work has been ongoing since 2004 and is directed by Beverley Glean, the artistic director of IRIE!, and Rosie Lehan, dance lecturer at City and Islington College (see *Animated Summer* 2007).

After the demise of two major APD professional summer schools - The African-Caribbean Dance Summer School run by Kajans Women's Enterprise in Birmingham, and the 'BAMI-JO' summer school by Badejo Arts in London - IRIE!>

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attempted to fill the gap by creating Making Tracks. This is a summer school for professional dancers that provides access for free-lance practitioners to train intensively with key industry professionals. Participants experience revision of technique, application of themes, choreographic exploration, methodologies and dance analysis.

Making Tracks 2008 proved to be a success. How do we measure that? Well, all the participants expressed a wish to have regular summer schools. Individuals also reported the positive impact that Making Tracks had on their dance practice, adding that the work had helped with their aspirations for future artistic endeavours.

Expressions of interest were encouraging for Making Tracks 2009, with a healthy ten initial enquiries. By the time the deadline arrived, however, there were only three completed applications. After a brief consultation with the sector*, the following issues were highlighted:

- The scheduling of the summer school didn't cater for practitioners in full-time employment
- The cost of the summer school was too high and didn't cater for free-lancers
- APD practice in the UK has little value in comparison to peer practice in Africa and the Caribbean.

So far Making Tracks has been delivered at cost, but the company has suffered a loss on both programmes. We still feel that having a summer school is necessary, and will therefore continue to programme Making Tracks as a way of investing in the expertise that exists in the UK. We are also taking into consideration that a potential target audience encompasses not only practitioners and students of dance, but also dance teachers in the formal education sector. But we must ask ourselves and our colleagues, what value is placed on APD practice in the UK?

IRIE!'s trail of training and artistic development has led



Above: Photo Slater-King.com

the company on a range of diverse pathways. Throughout the late eighties and nineties we continually evaluated the most effective routes to take in its attempts to formalise the teaching of African and Caribbean dance. Having written and delivered the first UK diploma in African and Caribbean dance, after three years it became clear to us that the formal education sector (and Higher Education in particular) wasn't ready to embrace a course that must have seemed quite perplexing at the time. Findings for the Dance and Diversity research project highlighted three main concerns: no discourse, no experienced teachers to deliver and an uncertainty as to who the target group would be.

Changing social, economic and cultural practices have gone some way in enabling a slight shift in the above concerns - for example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) UK City for Culture 2013; the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills current paper, The Learning Revolution; and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) initiative Innovating Workforce Development, to name a few. All highlight the need for broader thinking, working in partnership and fully embracing diversity.

The Foundation Degree course, a partnership between IRIE!, City and Islington College and London Metropolitan



Above: Photo © Jane Hobson.

University, echoes the aims of the organisation with its desire to place African and Caribbean dance forms on par with genres such as ballet and contemporary dance. The first cohort involved a range of people. Some sought versatility in a range of styles, and others wanted to make connections to their cultural heritage.

Looking forward to their graduation, choreography is one way in which the new generation will make its mark. Our vision is that these graduating students will follow a multitude of pathways as they strive to raise the profile of African and Caribbean dance forms, bringing it to a place where equality is no longer the issue. In this regard access remains at the core of the foundation degree programme, by promoting opportunities for those who may not have come through traditional routes. Through performance, education and community avenues the course aims to be reactive to the industry, with the intention of forming sustainable links with employers in order to create a new generation of versatile dance practitioners. For those interested in performance there is the added bonus of Connectingvibes, a company for artists at the beginning of their career conceived as a partnership between City and Islington College and IRIE! in 2000.

Raising the profile of African and Caribbean dance

forms, and persuading the dance community that they are forms worthy of serious study, has not always been easy. Maybe it's hard to commit to new forms of training without the legacy of years of formal practice. Publicity is still needed to draw attention to the benefits of producing versatile dancers adept at a multitude of languages and fit for the 21st Century. The ultimate goal, and one in line with our professional development programmes, must be to provide a greater level of access for training and thereby create new audiences for dance.

Despite our achievements we can't help feeling that the company's engagement with the APD sector and, for that matter, with the wider dance sector needs re-evaluation. Although we've remained dogged in our approach to the development of an infrastructure for APD, we can't forget that communication is the key to achieving success in all our endeavours. What tends to go amiss, however, is that communication is a two-way street. In as much as these initiatives have been developed for the sector, there still remains an issue about what that sector really wants. Is it formal dance training? Performance opportunities? Subsidy? Is there a need for investing as a sector in what we already have?

We invite dance practitioners to contact us with their views on these and the following questions: Should there be professional development training specialising in APD? If yes, how will or how has it already helped you? And, if your answer to the first question is no, our response is, why not?

contact 0208 691 6099 / **visit** www.iredancetheatre.org

*The consultation with the APD sector refers to an e-group of 54 organisations and individuals who have defined their work as being influenced by African and Caribbean culture.