

Donald Hutera.
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Regenerating identities

Donald Hutera, a one-person diaspora, paws at the roots of identity

The ways that we move help define us, but what defines the ways that we move? Is it something lodged inextricably in our individual genetic codes, or do we also gradually but unavoidably absorb the rhythms of the environments we happen to occupy?

Several years ago revisiting my birthplace of Minneapolis, the major city of the Midwestern state of Minnesota. Meeting a friend for lunch, I passed through the restaurant to the table where he was waiting. As I sat down he said, 'You don't move like someone from Minneapolis anymore.'

Now I'm no social scientist, clinical psychologist or anthropologist. I'm certainly not a certified kinesiologist. Nor am I, professionally speaking, any of the other -isty or -ismatic beings who talk the talk and walk the walk in terms of research into the topic of identity. And yet even as a layman I had little trouble grasping the gist of my friend's comment. He'd spotted a physical change in me, and one with which I'd probably still agree.

If indeed I no longer move like a Minneapolitan (as natives of that metropolis are called), neither do I feel I belong back in my hometown. I've lived away for too long. On the other hand I've been on this planet enough years to be able to stake a claim on my own identity, or so I'd like to think. Whether by accident or choice I'm an expatriate, although I could more sweepingly (and, perhaps, pretentiously) brand myself a citizen of the world. As such I give myself permission to lump nature with nurture so that, no matter where I am, I can potentially embrace my 'Hutera-ness' or, if I know myself really well, my 'Donald-ness.' It's a self that has roots in Polish peasantry (on both sides of my family) as well as the lakes and plains of Minnesota (although being city-bred I can't profess to being unduly au fait with either topographical feature), but to some extent it's also absorbed every landscape, society, performance or person to which I've ever been exposed.

All of this leads me, with typical circuitousness, to one of the focuses of this issue of *Animated*, and that is Black or African People's Dance. (Fight amongst yourselves regarding the choicest label.) My handiest entry point into the subject is *Re: Generations*, a two-day conference jointly organised by the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD), IRIE! dance theatre and State of Emergency Productions and held last November at London Metropolitan University. Subtitled 'International Perspectives of Dance of the African Diaspora,' the event drew together 100 or so delegates – dance artists, writers, academics and

other interested parties – whose collective aim is to help shape a future for dance from the African Diaspora particularly as practiced, presented and perceived in the UK.

Re: Generations afforded much food for thought. 'All cultures are fusion cultures,' observed keynote speaker Brenda Dixon Gottschild, adding that it's the artist's task to adopt or adapt, borrow or outright steal and thereby create something new. Funmi Adewole Kruczkowska was passionate and funny in her talk (some of which is reproduced in this issue), reminding listeners of the descriptive clichés of 'African-ness' as exotic, colourful and energetic while asking how African culture can be taken into the modern world that is the UK.

Alas, my programme marginalia got muddled. Was it Funmi or someone else who sagely remarked, 'I don't go to my village and argue with my grandmother, is this black dance? Is this African dance? Instead I ask, how do you relate to your community and what do you relate?' Nor am I sure who cautioned against too much cultural hand-wringing, citing a Nigerian's statement, 'What's most important to me is where my next meal's coming from, not my heritage?' Lurking beneath this is the danger of the sector's ghetto-isation. I think it was Brenda who quoted Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar, artistic director of *Urban Bush Women*: 'When are they gonna do a white dance festival?'

Aside from the juicy exchange of knowledge and ideas, one the highlights of *Re: Generations* was a quadruple bill of dance at Sadler's Wells. The piece that meant the most to me was *Frustrated*, a short but blisteringly sharp, strong female quintet co-created by Alesandra Seutin and Vicki Igbokwe. (Although each has her own company, respectively named *Vocab* and *Uchenna*, for this knockout East London Dance commission they dubbed themselves *ADiaspora Collective*.) *Frustrated* has had about half a dozen showings in the UK, but merits more. Combining gutsy, viscerally charged movement with a repetitive, rhythmically declarative text (superbly delivered by the phenomenal Carla Trim-Vamben), this gripping piece of dance-theatre says loads about anger and aspiration in ways with which anyone, regardless of race or gender, can identify. That includes yours truly. Or could it be that the work of Seutin, Igbokwe and company put me in touch with a feisty inner black/mixed race female self I never even knew I had?

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