

6 Focus on African People's Dance (APD)

Take a closer look: diversity in the Diaspora

Jeanette Bain-Burnett, ADAD Director, reveals the rich diversity of practice and ambition within the African People's Dance community in the UK and beyond



Re:Generations Conference delegates. Front row includes: Beverley Glean, Artistic Director, IRIE! dance theatre; Jeanette Bain-Burnett, Director, ADAD and Professor Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Key-note speaker. Photo: Toby Ross-Southall (Messrs)

We support an ever-evolving group of dance practices, ranging from traditional African and Caribbean forms through to jazz, Afro-Latin and contemporary fusion. Much of our work is focused on the representation of these forms within British theatre; however it is clear that these theatrical practices are inextricably linked with their expressions in community, education, training and academic settings.

One of the most common questions I am asked when I introduce the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) is ‘What does Diaspora mean?’

The word comes from the Greek root for ‘disperse’ and it refers to a community of people who have moved from one place of origin (whether willingly or by force) and settled around the world. The African Diaspora therefore refers to people of African descent who have settled in other parts of the world. This dispersed community remains connected by its common history, which includes Western imperial rule and the transatlantic slave trade but which also encompasses a rich and exciting cultural heritage, expressing itself in distinctive ways depending on the unique journeys of each ‘Diasporic’ community.

This definition underpins the nature of ADAD’s work. The diversity and commonality of the dances emerging out of this dispersed community must be embraced in order for dance from the African Diaspora to thrive. Furthermore, the future success of this community of practice will depend on our capacity to find and nurture our connections with each other and other communities, and to understand the Diaspora in all its diversity as a ‘place’ of endless creative possibilities.

There are a number of UK-based and international models of practice that I believe are shaping the future of dance of the African Diaspora. The common thread that holds these initiatives together is that they are about creating meaningful connections - through performance, participation,

training and academic discourse - between the disparate parts of our community. They bring together emerging and established artists; traditional and contemporary practice; dance theatre and community-based professionals; practitioners and academics - recognising that these connections make for a healthier community of practice.

Drawing together – L’ecole des Sables

One such model, which stands out in my mind is the work of Senegalese choreographer and dance educator, Germaine Acogny. Through ADAD’s professional development fellowship, Trailblazers, we have supported a number of UK-based artists to attend intensives at L’ecole des sables in Senegal. The school was set up by Acogny, who is described by many as the ‘mother of contemporary African dance’. It provides a context for sharing her pioneering work through training professional dancers in her distinctive approach to African-based movement. Over the past 4 years, Acogny has hosted a series of training intensives focused on bringing together dancers from across the African continent and its Diaspora. In addition to providing professional level training, these gatherings also include exchange and sharing between peers of traditional dances and creative workshops resulting in new work and collaborations across continents.

Touring and sharing – African Crossroads

In autumn 2010, Dance Umbrella,

London’s prolific International contemporary dance festival, presented a special strand of work called African Crossroads. Curated by Eckhard Thiemann, this programme of work brought eight artists from across the African Continent to the UK. One of the most meaningful elements of the programme was that it provided opportunities for the visiting artists to meet, interact and work with UK-based dancers, choreographers and audiences. ADAD worked with Dance Umbrella to deliver some of these contextual events, including the African Currents weekend hosted by East London Dance. The weekend featured the UK premiere of four contemporary African works by Cie 1er Temps (Senegal), Michel Kouakou (Ivory Coast), Papy Ebotani (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Kaolack (Senegal). Each piece was complemented by work by East London Dance’s associate artists – Vocab Dance, Avant-Garde Dance and C-12 Dance Theatre, responded directly to the work of the African choreographers. The artists ate together and participated in a facilitated conversation about the nature and definition of their work. This resulted in rich dialogue about audience responses; the tensions between abstract and narrative dance theatre; and how ‘African’ creativity is redefining itself within the global dance context.

Dancing Communities – Batuke Festival

As I have explored and discovered more about African-influenced dance, >



Left and far left:
Re:Generations
Conference,
Pair Dance, Rush.
Photo:
Toby Ross-Southall
(Messrs)

Right:
Re:Generations
Conference,
Tolo Ko Tolo,
This Body.
Photo:
Toby Ross-Southall
(Messrs)

I have been struck by the way in which dance acts as a cohesive force, bringing people together around a common experience. One community within the Diaspora that exemplifies this is the Luso-African community (the Portuguese-speaking members of the Diaspora). The Batuke! Festival took place at the Urdang, London in September 2010. Produced by Kizomba UK, and branded as 'The first International Afro-Latin Music & Dance Festival in the UK', the event highlighted 'the culture of the Luso-African Diaspora (Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Sao Tome, Guinea Bissau) and its many influences (West Indies, Brazil, Europe)'.

Delegates from all over Europe attended the event, and as I wandered through the venue chatting with a truly diverse group of people and observing, it was evident that more than anything else Batuke was about experiencing and becoming a part of Luso-African culture. The organisers highlighted that so much of the work in the field of dance of the African Diaspora in the UK is focused on the theatrical setting that we forget that many of our traditions are rooted in communities coming together and taking part.

One of the activities was a panel discussion with artists featured in the event about approaches to teaching and conserving Afro-Latin dance traditions. I was struck by the sense of community, passion and commitment

amongst both the participants and practitioners. One of the artists on the panel was Petchu, the award-winning founder of Ballet Tradicional Kilandukilu. Together with his wife, Vanessa, he has been working in Portugal to conserve and share Angolan culture for over 30 years. As one of the first teachers to develop a structured methodology for Kizomba (a social partner dance, which originated in Angola in the 80s and 90s), he talked passionately about the need for dancers to train, research and have a deep understanding of cultural dance forms before setting up as teachers to pass these forms on. The discussion was a vibrant exchange between teachers and participants about the tension between the popularisation and conservation of culture. Kizomba UK plan to develop the event into a regular fixture on the dance calendar and have already started to plan the 2011 event.

ADAD – Cultivating connections

ADAD is proud to be a part of such a dynamic international community. We work with choreographers, dancers, dance teachers, academics, venues, producers, programmers and other cultural organisations to create a supportive professional network through which the beauty and creative potential of dance from the African Diaspora can be fully appreciated. We support an ever-evolving group of dance practices, ranging from

traditional African and Caribbean forms through to jazz, Afro-Latin and contemporary fusion. Much of our work is focused on the representation of these forms within British theatre; however it is clear that these theatrical practices are inextricably linked with their expressions in community, education, training and academic settings. Future success depends on our openness to engaging with all these sectors in our mission to develop, promote and document our art forms.

Over the past few years, ADAD has placed emphasis on activities that focus on encouraging these kinds of connections. In November 2010, the Re:Generations International Conference, delivered in partnership with IRIE! dance theatre, State of Emergency and London Metropolitan University, was a key moment bringing together the UK and International communities. In 2011, ADAD will host the second biennial Bloom Festival of Dance of the African Diaspora with events in three cities – Bristol, Leeds and London. Focused on exploring the creative possibilities within the Diaspora, the festival includes performance, discussion and open workshops including artists from across the UK and Europe. The first Bloom festival event will take place in Bristol on April 30th.

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