

Pathways to education and employment through African People's Dance

Beverley Glean, Artistic Director, IRIE! dance theatre and **Rosie Lehan**, of City and Islington College, reflect on some of the changes within APD and Higher Education



Jimmy Sanni and Martha Bishoff, *Traces of Home*, Connectingvibes* dance company. Choreographer: Oniel Pryce. Photo: Jane Hobson. www.janehobson.com

African Peoples Dance (APD)/Black Dance is at the heart of popular dance culture in the UK today.

However, for many in the formal dance sector the form is still seen as unsophisticated. This thinking is probably due to the journey of APD/Black Dance into our mindsets. Unlike ballet and some contemporary dance expressions, which developed under patronage in formal studios, schools and companies the form developed in our communities in everyday social spaces.

Reference to black people dancing in Britain can be traced back during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during Britain's trade in African slaves. However, the most common historical starting point in terms of a touring dance company came in 1946 when Les Ballets Negres, under the directorship of Wilbert Passley, also known as Berto Pasuka, launched their first season of dance in London's Twentieth Century Theatre. Although there were a number of solo dancers and musicians who worked together to do display dances, nothing existed at this time, which constituted black dancers working as a company. The company folded in 1953 after which black dance was seen through cabaret performances. Individual performers continued to perform at social events but still nothing structured.

The ten years between the 1960s and 1970s saw a number of visiting artists from Africa and the Caribbean link with UK-based performers in order >

1st year students,
Foundation Degree site
specific performance,
Passing Through.
Photo: Viesturs Gross

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to maintain a black dance profile. Also, sounds like reggae and calypso provided new and exciting rhythms and lyrics within the Black community and beyond. This laid the foundation for new and different forms of dance, 'black social dance'.

"Black dance provided entertainment that had accommodated and adapted to the new environment. Popular dance and music moved from the margins to the mainstream, and the first carnival ever in London was held on August Bank Holiday 1965. Black people raised a new voice and shifted their cultural emphasis from indoor to outdoor dance activities"(1).

Black dance made a significant gearshift in the mid 1970s. There were a number of African and Caribbean freelance dancers and musicians who were beginning to develop their dance language and felt the need to work in organized groups. The Arts Council had a tentative eye on the form but the work continued to develop in isolation of the wider dance/creative sector; as it was still seen as exotic, vibrant and as a crowd pleaser, setting the tone for further disconnection from the artistic/creative agenda.

Still perceived as a community activity rather than an art form. Ironically government policies hijacked the form under the social welfare agenda; therefore financial support

was forthcoming during the late 1970s via The Man Power Service Commission (MSC). As a number of the programmes were funded under 'employment and skills training' the groups were able to establish themselves as working dance companies, groups such as Lanzel, Ekome and Kokuma began creating and touring work as well as delivering education programmes. By this time other companies such as Dance Company 7, IRIE! dance theatre, Adzido Dance Ensemble (mainly London based) who were also creating, touring and delivering education work, were beginning to become visible around the formal funding programme.

"Looking across Europe, Britain is fortunate in having one of the most diverse portfolios of artists...the diversity of dance forms spans from the traditional to the contemporary with every nuance at the margins of both. Even with the decline in the number of companies witnessed in the last couple of decades, the range is notable. The diversity is undoubtedly to be celebrated – it also presents us with a challenge – that of definition..." (2).

There was a rising credibility of the form during the 1980s, particularly through the audiences viewing the work as well as the impact of education and community



engagement. While definition is vital, in the case of APD it would appear that the question of definition has overshadowed and in many ways halted its progress. During the debate there was a sense that the wheel was being re-invented again and again as there seemed to be no scale equivalent for the placing of Black Dance/APD within UK dance sector. The confusion was as prevalent among the Black Dance/APD sector as the wider dance sector, which prompted the Arts Council to



commissioned copious amounts of consultation/research all asking the same question 'What is Black Dance?'

"...when we use the term African dance there is often a connotation that we are talking about traditional dance...it is important to remember that just as we can talk about classical ballet, neo-classical ballet and contemporary ballet, then we can equally use that range of terms for other types of dance such as African or South Asian dance forms. No living culture is static". (3)

Its cultural context, rules of engagement and inclusive nature make APD the forerunner for a foundation in community dance. The sector itself has been so busy with the 'definition' agenda we have failed to connect consciously with the community dance, formal education and political debate on dance. There has also been a focus on the more popular/commercial areas of Black dance, which include music videos, carnival, Hip-Hop etc. drawing attention to a more sexualised,

pleasurable eroticism of the form. This continued to impact negatively, on the perception of APD. The sector at this point knew that a shift needed to take place and this needed to be through education both in the traditional and social sense. At the centre of that change had to be the voice of academics, cultural writers, researchers and the practitioners themselves. Our international counterparts, a group of highly influential names in dance, culture and education such as the late Professor >



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Rex Nettleford (Jamaica,) Dr Kariamuwelsh-Asante (USA) Dr Brenda Dixon Gottschild (USA) Germaine Acogny (Senegal) were already reflecting such concerns through their practice and published works.

The first two stages of IRIE!'s Dance and Diversity research (conducted by Beverley Glean and Rosie Lehan from 2005-2007) continues to confirm findings that within the dance industry there is a lack of opportunities to work in and promote African and Caribbean dance forms. More has to be done on the side of the APD sector as well as the wider dance sector to engage more broadly with the form. More importantly a lack of training pathways, has resulted in the absence of established dance artists proficient in the forms. If African and Caribbean dance becomes part of established training routes then the dance landscape begins to change, eventually the hope is that African and Caribbean Dance become a valued part of the British dance ecology.

The Higher Education (HE) route becomes important because it defines professional training, previous training in the forms have been mainly restricted to After School Clubs and projects/classes within the Further Education (FE) sector. Eventually the goal must be to make the forms part of Conservatoire training, if we are serious about access and diversity. In 2008 IRIE! dance theatre in partnership with City & Islington College and London Metropolitan University embarked on the delivery of a Foundation Degree (FdA) in Dance. The FdA was established to provide training in African and Caribbean dance and provide a broad range of

pathways for graduates. The course is designed to stimulate debate around the nature of the dance industry and promote a spirit of enterprise; whereby graduates are encouraged to carve out their own pathways, thus creating a new generation of dance artists. It is intended that the course will open up avenues for graduates to go into performance, community dance and choreography as well as formal education. We encourage independent thinking and openness towards other cultural dance forms. There is a strong emphasis on learning and understanding the cultural context in which dance is created. We recognise that many of our graduates will need to establish their own routes/projects/companies, as there is a distinct lack of performance opportunities.

Already there are moves to fire up the debate, the recent Re: Generations International Conference (4) attracted a host of International and national delegates who shared a wide range of practice in the forms. Courses at East London and Surrey Universities and the integration of African and Caribbean modules into a number of universities, alongside the practice of encouraging diverse work from young artists at East London Dance, have started to influence thinking and practice.

The FdA in Dance is young and feeling its way, its success will be measured by the destinations of the graduates. For example we know that the course has facilitated the majority of graduates from the 2008 cohort to create their own pathway. IRIE! has engaged three of the graduates as tutors for the organisation. Others

have gone on to pursue a third year full degree. One has recently been commissioned to create a dance piece for Connectingvibes* dance company. Another is about to set up as a social enterprise, developing dance in her community for 5 – 18 year olds. It is encouraging to know that they are still working, training or participating in professional development in dance. The course aims to act as a catalyst for current students and graduates, thereby increasing opportunities within the sector.

APD is visible in so many of our dance practices today. There is no denying that it is well embedded in many areas of the cultural industries, one has only to look at the dance vocabulary in our contemporary dance companies and to a greater extent west end productions. APD and APD artists have had a complex relationship with the mainstream. The prospects are changing, maybe not as fast as we would like, but nevertheless the sector is beginning to seek representation. Courses like the FdA and others like it will encourage more individuals to write about the form, giving rise to intellectual debate, which will in turn reposition APD within the UK dance landscape and ecology.

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References

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- (2) & (3) *Voicing Black Dance-The Pathway Here*-Hilary Carty 2007
- (4) www.adad.org.uk/regenerations