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More conversations please!

Funmi Adewole Kruczkowska, performer, writer and lecturer, reflects on past and present discussions within African People's Dance (APD)

In the last two years I have attended a number of events featuring dance performances that draw on African and Caribbean dance forms. They have woken me up to the change in the discussions between performers and about performances. At the beginning of last year, I had the opportunity to facilitate a choreo-lab produced by East London Dance and rubbed minds with some of the feistiest, adventurous and entrepreneurial dancers around. I then attended a site-specific performance that took place on the grounds of a church by outgoing students of the IRIE! dance theatre's Foundation Degree called *Passing Through*. The fusion of techniques and forms produced some startling moments and the graduates chatted excitedly about their training. I also had the opportunity to host the post show talk of African Dance Encounter, an event organised by the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) and the South Bank Centre. The performance was the outcome of an intensive collaboration between Nii Tagoe, 'Vicki' Igbokwe and Alesandara Seutin. Nii researches and stages traditional African forms, Vicki's interest is in Urban Contemporary dance and Alesandra Seutin fuses elements of African dance with urban dance and modern dance techniques. They spoke enthusiastically about their different approaches and their points of connection and the audience enjoyed their journey.

The discourse surrounding APD and Black dance is different now to what it was when I arrived in England from Nigeria about fifteen years ago. The sector was at a different stage of development and the focus was on developing an infrastructure for its practices. This resulted in much debate about the definition of terminology i.e. what is 'Black dance'? What is 'African Peoples Dance'?

One of the triggers for these debates was the defunding of the Black Dance Development Trust (BDDT). A National organisation, it was considered as working to a too narrow definition of African Peoples Dance, running courses featuring only African and African related dance forms. The defunding raised questions about the validity of Arts Council's role in defining the parameters of an artistic practice and whether it is feasible to expect a single organisation to manage the diversity of forms and practices in the sector. The cross-sectorial, inter-institutional discussions which this provoked are outside the scope of this article. It suffices to say these debates resulted in the commissioning and publication of several reports - *Advancing Black Dancing* (1993) and *Time for Change* (2001) are possibly the most well-known.

Nowadays, dancers hardly think about umbrella terms like 'Black dance' or 'African Peoples Dance', unless they are seeking funding or support. With organisations such as ADAD, State of Emergency and IRIE! dance theatre taking a lead in supporting artistic production and professional development, 'infrastructure' is a less desperate issue. This is probably the reason behind another shift in the discourse around APD. More critical attention is given to the cultural and artistic value of the work being produced by dancers.

15 years ago, observers were supportive but quizzical: what was the value of APD outside of community contexts? APD was accepted for its role within the 'social inclusion' agenda. But as an artistic practice – did it work? What was the value of APD outside of community context? Many practitioners resented the perception that the function of APD was to 'keep unruly youngsters off the streets'. Of necessity, for a dance sector to find its place within a cultural and artistic landscape, it must converse >



Funmi Adewole Kruczowska. Photo: Simon Richardson



The Body in African Dance project workshop led by Funmi Adewole. Photo: Ukachi Akalawu. Funder: Visiting Arts

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with that landscape. It's ironic, however, that the community dance sector has been the main participant in that conversation, contributing to raising the profile of APD within academic and artistic circles.

The concept of professional dancers taking dance to the people - the ethos promoted by community dance - provided a platform from which many African and Caribbean dance practitioners were able to provide dance classes, and even launch dance companies in previous years. They engaged with the general public, recruited dancers, and even trained performers in this context. Kokuma, Badejo Arts, IRIE! dance theatre and Adzido Pan African dance ensemble amongst others all run programmes which served as the entry points for many practitioners.

The ethos of community dance has also done a great deal to change attitudes towards non-western dance forms. Person-centred approaches used by many community dance practitioners have encouraged the use of African and Caribbean dance forms and urban dance, in schools contexts and in creative dance projects. Though equal space cannot be given to every dance form within the choreographic process, young people are encouraged to introduce steps, rhythms and movement from their heritage and family backgrounds in the creation of pieces. According to Christy Adair in her book 'Dancing the Black question' this was one of the forming experiences of the original Phoenix dance company. Their exploration of Reggae music and dance was affirmed within their early dance making and performance experiences at their youth club in Leeds. Though this process has been questioned because its organising principles have been taken from western contemporary dance it still encourages a respect for other cultures.

The development of discourse in both APD and community dance has caused me as a researcher to reflect on importance of including ethics within our definitions of our dance. The conversation between them has helped break down the division between 'stage dance form' and 'social dance form'. Many youngsters see all forms of dance, African, Caribbean, Urban, as being suitable for

theatrical presentation or as source material for choreography. Moreover, as the community dance sector has developed its discourse greater value has been placed on working in community contexts. Many APD practitioners no longer see themselves as being 'relegated' to community dance. It is something they choose to do as part of their practice. Dancers dance. They dance in different places to achieve different things. Full-stop. The developments in these sectors have caused me, as a researcher, to reflect on the importance of including our ethics within the definitions of our dance.

This brings me back to a conversation I had before African Dance Encounter, with Jeanette Bain-Burnett, the director of ADAD. She told me that one of the aims of the event was to encourage discussion and exchange between artists and promote a 'community of practice' within APD. For me this is an exciting proposition. Practitioners older than me might say this has echoes of how the sector saw itself when it first became visible in Britain. A community of practice is made up of practitioners who 'develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems' (1). At the Re: generations conference, last November, I saw this 'community of practice' in action. It was two days of intensive, enjoyable discussions - physical and verbal, with performances scattered throughout the day; in stairwells, in the conference centre and on stage. We were constantly reminded that dance is about living, moving and being. We saw the possibility of taking APD, in many directions. Possibilities exist in its technique, forms, rhythms, imagery, and histories to inspire performance, critical thinking, and community engagement. APD crosses performance arenas, links spaces and places and impacts new audiences. More conversations please. Conversations keep the dance floor open.

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(1) Smith, M. K. (2003, 2009) 'Communities of Practice', the encyclopaedia of informal education, www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm