

Kweku Aacht.
Photo: Stephen Thornhill



Rooted visionaries

Kweku Aacht, director of deep:black and diarist in residence at East London Dance (eld), in dialogue with three of the UK's most exciting young dance artists about identity, community and defining their work

Tony Adigun, Freddie Opoku-Addaie and Alesandra Seutin are all part of the eld artist family and are on fire right now! They're all artistic directors of their dance companies Tony: Avant Garde Dance, Freddie: Jagged Antics and Alesandra: Vocab Dance Company (Vocab). Fellow, Black African, UK based artists. All Driven by their eclectic experiences of growing up in the '80s and '90s, coming of age in the advent of the millennium and now visioning their individual routes for 2011 and beyond.

My work is all about identity and these three artists share my passion for exploring who we are, in relation to each other, through our own unique perception of the world.

Back in January Alesandra and Freddie went out to perform their genre defying solos at Attakkalari India Biennial 2011 in Bangalore India. On their return, both artists were buzzing from the overwhelming response from

their audience who had clearly never seen anything like their work before. Observers of both Alesandra and Freddie performing their powerful solos were taken by the strong connection they were able to create with their audience. Tony (Avant Garde Dance) who's also no stranger to taking work overseas and challenging audience perceptions, is looking forward to taking his company and it's unique form out to Vietnam later this year. I met up with our three featured artists at various locations across London and posed some questions.

What drew you to dance?

Tony Adigun (TA): My passion for music essentially. Music before dance even. It's at the core of the company, we're a visual representation of what you hear.

Freddie Opoku-Addaie (FO): I didn't consciously say I'm going to be a

dancer, it's my heritage. Initially from my grandparents and from dance being a way of life in Ghana. Dance was just something you did.

Alesandra Seutin (AS): The way I grew up in Belgium. Being 'Afropean' (African mum and European dad), the music I listened to, hip-hop, house, rock, Jazz and classical. My older brothers were street dancers, they really inspired me.

When did you cross the line from being a dancer into a being maker?

TA: 2007 Choreodrome (choreo' programme at the Place) was a turning point in my development. I was away from the scene for the whole summer and I felt so enthused, so re-energised. Finally at one with the work I wanted to create, but maybe hadn't felt powerful or comfortable enough to make before then. That was the first time I really thought. This is me. I don't have to >

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Clockwise from left:

Naomi Deira, Vocab Dance Company.
Photo: Irven Lewis

Ricardo Xampion in Illegal Dance, Avant Garde Dance.
Photo: Irven Lewis

Freddie Opoku-Addaie, Flightless Solo, ChoreoRoam 2009.
Photo: Benedict Johnson



do what people expect from a hip-hop company.

FO: Going to California on a dance exchange programme in my third year at the Place had a major impact on me. Until then I was more of a 'prancer', taking every opportunity to dance I could. The trip to California opened my eyes. Americans there can do most of the vocabularies and see African, jazz, contemporary etc. on one level. They're all just techniques. When I came back to the Place, technically I felt more confident about myself. I thank Tricia (Rainne) and the Place for that. Tricia knew I needed to get that out of my system and understand that all forms are valid.

AS: A key turning point was doing 'Episodes of Blackness' at Blue Print Stratford Circus back in 2007. The feedback from the audience was overwhelming. I felt so inspired and excited that my work had touched people in that way. A year later I returned as a guest with 'Kwenda Kwenda'. I had applied for the Blueprint Bursary and not got it, so I really wanted to show eld what I was capable of. That as they say, is history!



Do you see your work as being representative of African People's Dance in 21st Century Britain?

TA: I don't really get the term 'African People's Dance' but the methods and the structure of traditional African Dance is in the passion I try to instil into my dancers. That comes from my mum who was a dancer in Nigeria. Sometimes I catch myself and think. Wow! This is scary! The upbringing and discipline I got from her growing up, prepared me for Avant Garde Dance. When we're performing, I would hope we transmit the emotional connection I feel when I see traditional African dance.

FO: 'African People's Dance?' I guess it makes me think of the folk traditions. Certainly what I received from my grandparents was a ritualistic form for self-expression, they certainly didn't see it as 'African People's Dance'. I'm more interested in the form and the aesthetics. African is grounded. It's a technique. I go to Paris to work with Elsa Walliastson and she specialises in dance from all over Africa. Most of the people in Elsa's class are white westerners. They can move as much as the African's! That term African People's Dance makes it sound like it

only belongs to Africans, it creates distance. At the end of the day I'm Ghanaian and Ghana is always in my work. I haven't put a specific value on it but it's never going to leave.

AS: I call my work 'Afro Eclectic' but I'm getting to a place where I don't even want to define it anymore. I'm just moving. Out in India, some people didn't understand my vocabulary. They'd never seen someone moving with that African essence but also with a technical precision they may think only Western dance has. In my heart I'm a street dancer, in the body of an African dancer, topped off with western contemporary training. That's why I love African dance, there's that relationship to hip-hop. The BAM! Sheer passion! Give it! Dance!

How important is family in the dance you make?

TA: Dance is in my whole family, no one's really afraid to express themselves through dancing. Some times me and my mum will battle. I'll be like 'Me and you one-on-one!' (laughs) and we'll go head to head to traditional Nigerian music. It's something that brings us together, it's that common denominator, where we

can all just let go.

My daughter Tamae is probably the most involved in my dance work. People often ask if I'd like her to be a dancer. It'd be nice. That whole fairy tale, where she takes over Avant Garde Dance. But I wouldn't push her into being a dancer.

FO: I got the tradition from my great grandparents. What I took from them was the whole idea of a person being present without presenting. Which is an element that some people find difficult within my work. People will say 'Oh so this is a process taking up a performance space.' But actually back home, audiences don't want to see that, they want to see a person doing their own thing. People will clap for the one who's the most present and individual, not the one who's technically solid or perfectly presented. It's all about the one who's going nuts! I think that's stayed with me. That comes from my family.

AS: Every Sunday we'd have late breakfast. We had this wooden hi-fi and my brothers would put on a record and we'd all dance. My mum and my brothers would just be going for it, but I was shy, I'd just be doing a little two-step. Then I'd go back to my >

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room, put on the radio and go crazy! A few years later I'd hang with my brothers street crews back in Belgium, they taught me house, waacking, locking and popping. I think my family is also the reason my work is so eclectic. I was inspired by both my mum's journey from Malawi to South Africa then Zimbabwe and my dad's heritage from Belgium where I grew up. Also his love of Jazz and Classical music.

Would you say you're part of a particular dance community?

TA: We stand in the middle of a lot of communities because there are a lot of elements that are important to us. We have a foot in the hip-hop old community, international hip-hop dance community. We have a stance in the contemporary dance community e.g. The Place. We feel a sense of community with our festival, outdoor site-specific work and our national theatre work. I love where we stand in the thick and in the middle of all of it.

FO: For me it's not about any one specific community, 'cos I've lived in a lot of communities. I've experienced a lot of cultural structures as I've travelled around over the years. Fundamentally we're all the same. I'm interested creating work using rules and tasks, these cut across all cultures. I'm trying to find universal forms, like non-verbal language e.g. street non-verbal language.

AS: I'm in two worlds: the contemporary world, which is more middle class and white, where my work is often seen as exotic and curious. Then the 'urban' or hip-hop world. With Vocab I want my work to be received by audiences across the

board. I want it to say something to people no matter what country I'm in. That's why I called my company Vocab. I'm committed to developing a language that's universally understood and not something that's accessible to only one specific community.

How much of your work would you say is community dance?

TA: We're resident company at the Petchey Academy in Hackney, I love it! I'm Hackney 'til death! I love working with kids and especially kids in my Borough. Our aim is to raise the level of dance in the school and in the community. Avant Garde Dance from day one has been about education, love teaching in schools and doing commissions for youth companies. The kids find it challenging. It's about trying to leave them with a sense of bravery. I enjoy enthusing kids with the power to be different.

FO: This will always get me in trouble, because I'm really not trying to make a distinction between a professional dancer and an untrained dancer in the community. I think this could in the end be the reason my work will never be popular to the same level as those who work only with professional dancers 24/7.

AS: I would say I'm putting more energy into the professional side because of the work I'm doing at the moment because of the vision I have for Vocab. Ultimately I want to go all sectors, but I'll always come back to the community because where the raw energy that drives me is. I'm always teaching whether it's for Dance United or The University of East London. I also love the vibe and passion of the clubs and hip-hop/street jams.

What's next for you and your company?

TA: I'll travel as much as I can with Avant Garde Dance, seeing and experiencing different ways of living. Then bring that rawness and the aesthetic of the places we visit back to the work we do. Next it's Vietnam. I just want to keep on spreading the word.

FO: I'm collaborating with Frauke Requardt's on a piece for April's 2011 Place Prize. In the piece we're doing, I'm continuing with my drive to be present in each moment of each performance. Going forward all I can really do is say 'this is who I am, I'm not ready change my work or my ideas.'

AS: I'll continue to express and provoke and reach audiences everywhere. In my generation I've only experienced black companies emerging. Emerging but never really arriving. No black companies that are getting the level of support Richard Alston or Hofesh Schechter get. I need to generate that kind of funding now because I want to create a movement! I want the time to work with the dancers so we can develop and grow together, to sustain that power and that spiritual connection. I want Vocab to be a dance family that's worked and sweated together and when we light up the stage. It's like. Work it! Own it! Serve it!

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