

Flatfoot Dance Company's training programme in South Africa

Dr Sarahleigh Castelyn, Choreographer, Researcher, and Senior Dance Lecturer at the University of East London, describes Flatfoot's work in training dancers

Snapshot one

I grew up in South Africa during the height of Apartheid, when Whitney Houston was played on the state radio, but I as a 'white' South African was not legally allowed to dance with somebody whose skin colour resembled hers. It was a schizophrenic time, where the smell of tear gas, the sight of army trucks, big hair, and shoulder pads was a norm. It was also the time when I learnt how to dance like a zombie, jive to a township beat, and show off my impression of a robot.

Many years later, and now residing in London, I was invited by Lliane Loots, the Artistic Director of Flatfoot Dance Company, based in South Africa, to work with dancers who had successfully auditioned to train with Flatfoot's Training Company; I had an inkling of what I might like to explore in a choreographic project. I was keen to find out what these young dancers knew about this period of South African history, and the dance styles that were performed on community hall stages, in music videos aired on state televisions in suburban areas, and on the dusty streets of the townships. Most of the dancers selected for the training company were born when Nelson Mandela was no longer imprisoned by the Apartheid regime. In South African popular culture this generation are referred to as the 'Born Frees', a term that plays on both South Africans who were not born under the Apartheid regime and the popular film *Born Free* (1966).

Snapshot two

Flatfoot Dance Company is a dance company with a contemporary dance focus based in the harbour city of Durban, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Recently Flatfoot Dance Company was invited to open the South African Dance Umbrella in Johannesburg in February and there performed two of their acclaimed works *Sifiso E. Kweyama's Circle* (2010), and *Bloodlines* (2009), choreographed by Loots. Later in July, the company won a Standard Bank Ovation Award for *Bhakti* (2011) at the National Arts Festival held in Grahamstown. The company 'works to create socially conscious dance theatre' (Jomba Programme Note, 2005, p.15), and this social consciousness does not occur only on the stage, but is

found in other aspects of the company's work; its young adult training programme, and its dance education and dance development programmes offered in Durban and its surrounding areas. The company is a registered not-for-profit organisation that receives support from the South African National Arts Council, the Dutch development agency, HIVOS, and is housed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (see Flatfoot Dance Company website).

In order to contextualise the company, it is necessary to give some background of the people, the place, and the dance practices in KwaZulu-Natal. The province exemplifies South African multiculturalism: it is the site of the Zulu Kingdom; it has a history of Indian indentured labour and therefore the largest population of Indians outside of India; it was an independent Afrikaner homeland; it was the last dominion of the British colonial empire; it is the site of many influential moments in South African and international history such as the forced removal of Mahatma Gandhi off a train in KwaZulu-Natal (May 1893) which led to his decision to fight racial discrimination and his policy of non-violence known as Satyagraha; it is the major point of entry to South Africa and the African continent due to its two major harbours of Durban and Richard's Bay: KwaZulu-Natal is often referred to as the gateway to Africa. The dancers who train with Flatfoot Dance Company are representative of this diversity. There are isiZulu speakers, Afrikaans speakers, English speakers, Sotho speakers... South Africa has eleven official languages, and the make-up of the training company truly represents this.

Snapshot three

As a consequence of its geography and history, there are a wide range of dance languages in practice, including South African traditional dance such as Indlamu, a dance style commonly associated with isiZulu speakers, Indian classical dance languages like Bharata Natyam and Khatak, European and North American contemporary dance, for instance contact improvisation and Graham-based technique, urban dance forms such as breaking and Isipantsula, and Ballet styles.

However, there is little formal training on offer to young

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aspiring dancers who might want to develop their dance skills or their possible dance careers, hence Flatfoot Dance Company's mission 'to offer a young adult training programme (Flatfoot Training Company), which aims to offer technique training and performance dance skills to young KwaZulu-Natal based dancers (16 years and older). The training company auditions for up to 30 dancers each year, and classes are held in late afternoons and early evenings (twice weekly) to allow for participants in the programme to continue to school, study or do part-time work.' The dance classes are free and the dancers come from diverse backgrounds in terms of dance training and socio-economic status. Many of these dancers face long journeys back home after class, yet their commitment to dance is inspiring, and because of this and other factors, I feel I have to share with you their latest work, which was performed on the Fringe night at the Jomba Contemporary Dance Experience, an international dance festival that is held annually in Durban in early September. Furthermore, I have to confess that I have a personal relationship with this dance company. I was able to train with and dance for this company in the late 1990s prior to the company turning professional in 2002/3. It is because of this opportunity that I was able to access formal dance training as well, and therefore I have much in common with the young adults of the training company.

Snapshot four

On a cool winter's evening, I met the dancers from the training company for the first time and witnessed a technique class led by Lliane Loots. It was only two weeks prior that these dancers had successfully auditioned for the training company. A few of the dancers had previously trained with the company, and a few were new to the company, and moreover new to formal dance training. It was clearly evident to me when watching the dancers that there were those who had had access to either Ballet or contemporary dance, dancers who had experience of dance styles such as breaking, Bharata Natyam, and Indlamu, and there were dancers who had little experience of any training systems or particular dance styles.

Nevertheless they all showed an eagerness and a sense of focus in the class, asking for feedback on their execution of an exercise, helping each other in remembering a motif sequence: overall a level of engagement that resembled a professional company. The dancers have to audition for the training company, and if they miss a specific number of classes, they lose their place, which ensures a strong commitment to the company; at the last audition there were around 100 people auditioning for a company of 30 dancers.

Snapshot five

After the technique class, I led a short introduction sharing my ideas for the project, memories of South Africa in the 1980s. At one point in this session, the dancers had to, through the use of moving images, summarise their knowledge of that era. It was of great interest that many of the dancers performed a version of Michael Jackson's Thriller, and motifs that referenced many of the popular dance styles of that era, such as the robot.

During the next few weeks, the dancers and I worked together researching South Africa in the 1980s, interviewing other South Africans, debating key historical moments, discussing people's experiences of this era, exploring signature movement practices and styles, and collaboratively creating choreography that would bring this period to life in performance. The dancers and I used our dancing bodies to mine memories of this era, and this resulted in sensitive discussions about the politics of the time, about how many of their parents lived under the Apartheid regime, and about the dance styles that their parents spoke fondly of such as the Jive that was popular in the townships, made even more so due to the influence of the Mbongeni Ngema's musical Sarafina (1985). What was interesting was the common interests that these young dancers shared with the dancers I teach in London, their desire to learn more about popular and social dance styles such as breaking, and the influence of television dance shows on the wider role of dance in society. There was a genuine political and social understanding of the integral and important role dance plays in cultural practice. >

Snapshot six

On the evening of September 5, the dancers performed the outcome of this choreographic project on the stage of the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre where Jomba Contemporary Dance Experience was being held. During the previous weeks, the dancers had constructed their own warm-up drawing on key movements from the choreography, and ensuring that the warm-up met the necessary requirements for the performance. For many of these dancers, it would be the first time on stage, and for a few, it would be another valuable opportunity to develop their performance skills.

During the rehearsals, I had randomly divided the dancers into five groups who had together workshopped a section of the choreography sharing their favourite dance styles, such as the moonwalk or gumboot, and possibly demonstrating a recognisable moving image of the time period, such as protestors dancing the toyi-toyi with clenched fists. Opening out the cypher to include the audience, each group performed their section cheered on by the remainder of the company who circled around the group dancing. The choreographic project was titled Brenda and the Bluebottles with the title drawing on both a popular and personal memory of 1980s South Africa. Brenda Fassie was dubbed the 'Madonna of the Townships' by TIME Magazine (2001) and was a South African pop star who appealed across the racial groups in South Africa. Her well-known single 'Weekend Special' (1986) closed the performance with the dancers moving in time not only with each other, but with the video footage I had located of Fassie performing this song in a nightclub resplendent in 1980s fashion.

Finally, bluebottles are a type of jellyfish known for their sting, and when the northeasterly blows in Durban, they invade the beaches. When I grew up in South Africa under the Apartheid state, beaches were racially segregated. However, I have a memory of my parents ignoring the government's legislation, and me dancing up and down on the shoreline with other young South Africans, rocks in hands, trying to pop the bluebottles that had washed up on the beach...

Working with the training company had enabled me to revisit my childhood, had offered the young dancers the opportunity to discover more about their families' experiences and nation's history, and finally, when many in the audience stood up from their seats and applauded these young developing dancers, had not only provided all of us with snapshots of our past, but also reminded us of the power of dance to entertain and bring people to different levels of consciousness.

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Flatfoot Dance Training Company, Brenda and the Bluebottles: a choreographic project exploring South Africa in the 1980s. Photo: Val Adamson



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