

Opposite page:  
Francis Angol, Ritual  
of Entrapment.  
Photo: Terry Waite  
Right: Christy Adair  
and Ramsay Burt



# British dance and the African diaspora research project

Through their ongoing research projects **Christy Adair**, Professor of Dance Studies, York St John University and **Ramsay Burt**, Professor of Dance History, De Montfort University question and challenge 'What is Black Dance?'

**The British dance and the African diaspora research project seeks to write black British dance artists and their legacies back into history.** It is not the first initiative that has tried to do so. Part of our aim is to consider what it is that makes it so difficult to acknowledge the contributions to British dance history that have been made by British-based dancers who are black and why they have not received the recognition they deserve. It tries to understand the nexus of aesthetic, institutional, and conceptual problems that have rendered these dancers invisible, and, in some cases, excluded them from most accounts of British dance history. A key factor, we believe, is the inadequacy of existing frameworks to provide a suitable basis for analysis.

The term 'black dance' suggests a singular style or genre of dance or movement that is separate from, for example, Ballet or contemporary dance; by doing so it makes it difficult to recognise the broad range of different approaches developed by British-based dancers who are black. We are therefore holding a

series of events mapping histories and memories of dance in different parts of the country and connecting younger dancers with ones from older generations to reveal the continuities while at the same time acknowledging that the sector is dynamic and changes over time. To date we have held two one-day events in Leeds and Liverpool, which we are calling Roadshows, that include an open professional class and public panel discussions. There will be a third in Birmingham in the Autumn. An exhibition at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool will draw on our findings.

In the Arts Council of England's Report, *Time for Change*, the authors noted that "there is not yet a body of work that can be labelled 'Black Dance'. However, it is evident that a new vocabulary is being born out of the black British experience, which might well dominate the choreography of black British artists in the future." (1) Note here that the report hopes for 'a new vocabulary', as if the broad diversity of vocabularies and approaches that are proliferating are a

problem, rather than a strength.

Since the 1970s, a number of British-based dancers who are black have been teaching and producing performance work in a variety of dance styles. Some drew on music and dance traditions from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and other former African colonies and from the Caribbean. Others worked within the genres of Ballet, Jazz and contemporary dance from the United States of America (USA). Thus, for example, Peter Badejo, Felix Cobson, and George Dzikunu, amongst others, taught and initiated new forms of 'African dance' during the 1970s and 1980s leading to a vibrant artistic revival in Britain. Companies like Adzido, Delado, Ekome, Kokuma, and Lanzel drew upon traditional African rhythms and patterns; others like Greta Mendez of MAAS Movers and Beverley Glean with Irie! drew upon Caribbean dance styles while artists such as Sheron Wray, Corrine Bougard, members of Phoenix Dance Company (now known as Phoenix Dance Theatre) and RJC Dance Company explored styles of Jazz and contemporary dance. Still

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others such as Jonzi D have from the 1990s onwards used Hip Hop dance forms and techniques to create hybrid performance forms.

In attempting to map out new approaches in this research we avoid the problematic term 'black dance' and instead talk about dancers who are black and/or dance and the African diaspora. In the latter term we are indicating current dance practices and legacies from Africa and the Caribbean which have made an impact on the British dance landscape. Christy has argued in her book *Dancing the Black Question* that the dancers in Phoenix Dance Company were expected by the funding bodies, critics and audiences to represent 'the black community'. They carried what Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer identified as 'the burden of representation'. Their seminal paper, *De Margin and De Centre (2)*, noted that political struggles and unrest in the 1980s led to the formulation of arts funding policies in the UK that encouraged multiculturalism. Black and Asian dancers were funded because of the social good it was believed they could do. This resulted in the expectation that their work would be representative of their ethnicities. It was as if they were expected to speak for their communities as a whole. This was not of course something that white artists were expected to do.

In our first roadshow in Leeds, Namron taught a contemporary dance class in which he remembered the sorts of classes he used to teach to members of Phoenix Dance Company and other young dancers in Leeds during the 1980s. His publicity states that he "was the first black

British contemporary dancer to be employed by a British company". It is clear from this that he recognises the representative aspect of his position. He is an important role model for dancers who are black and his teaching and performing have had an impact on numerous dancers' careers. Francis Angol acknowledged during the second Roadshow in Liverpool that African people's dance was at the heart of everything he did although he considers his work to be contemporary. All dancers and choreographers who have been participating in the research project work from the specificity of their own trainings and backgrounds. They do not create choreography to represent the black community. They make work in relation to their own concerns, some of which may speak directly to specific black communities in Britain or may not. They work from, but not for, black experiences in Britain.

If one looks at some of the often inadequate reviews that have been written over the years about performances by British-based dancers who are black, it often seems as if the critic is looking for the kinds of clear, clean, slightly understated aesthetic qualities valued in the work of many white British choreographers; or the reviewer assumes that the choreographer or company is trying to create a 'black' work using 'traditional' African or Caribbean forms, and therefore misses the extent to which they may be working with structures or approaches from contemporary dance, reinterpreting these in ways that are informed by black culture.

There is now a body of critical dance theory developed largely in

the USA – by Professors Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Kariamu Welsh-Asante, Tommy Defrantz, Yvonne Daniels, Robert Farris Thompson and others – that identifies African or Africanist aesthetic qualities. We believe these can usefully be applied to the choreography and performance of black artists in Britain who are working in a broad range of different approaches. The two main areas in which discussions about Africanist movement qualities have developed are rhythm and spirituality.

Many scholars have investigated the way that rhythm is central to dance and music forms that have spread across the world from African roots. Barbara Browning, writing about the difficulties that white (and some black) dance students can have when learning the complicated polyrhythms of Samba, notes that sometimes teachers tell people to stop thinking and dance. But, she adds, it "isn't to say that the body is incapable of understanding more things at once than can be articulated in language. One has no choice but to think with the body". (3)

Robert Farris Thompson, from his research in Ghana and Nigeria, has discussed the differences between European classical music and the complex polyrhythms of dance and drumming traditions. In West Africa, drummers do not play in unison but the master drummer generally "creates pleasing clashes with the rhythmic structure of his helpers. He departs from their text, as it were, and improvises illuminations". (4) Thompson calls this "playing apart", and points out that dancers also "play apart" from the rhythms. He contrasts

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this with the European classical music tradition where dancers and musicians follow the same rhythms although dance and music are seen as separate forms, while in Africa dancers “play apart” but don’t recognise any separation between dance and music.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, following Thompson, discusses the aesthetic of the cool where the dancer may be working fast, hard, and hot, but their face seems to remain cool. This rhythm and energy, she argues, gives African American dancers ‘soul’: “For African American performers, soul is the nitty-gritty personification of the energy and force that it takes to be black and survive. Rhythm, and the many textures and meanings implied in the concept (percussive drive, pulse, breath and heartbeat, for example), play a pivotal role in generating and disseminating soul power.” (5)

This is surely also something British-based black dancers also know and use. During a public discussion of early rehearsal and performance footage from Phoenix Dance Company’s archives at the Leeds Roadshow, Dr. Jean Johnson Jones noted that the young founders seemed to have a confidence that young black men in Britain aren’t supposed to have. Where did that come from? she asked. Edward Lynch responded that for him it was the energy he got from dancing. For Dixon Gottschild, this is what soul power does. It is, she says, having something intangible that is an invaluable asset, when one has almost nothing of value that is tangible.

For some dancers soul is a spiritual quality. Merville Jones, a founder of Phoenix Dance Company, identified

the work of the early company saying, “it comes from the heart, it has spirituality behind it”. H. Patten spoke at a study day at De Montfort University about the centrality of spirituality in his work and about the connections he is researching between dancehall moves and those performed in Jamaican church services.

To draw together our argument, what we are proposing is that a way to get beyond the problems created by the term ‘black dance’ is to shift the focus from styles, forms, and vocabularies towards the analysis of aesthetic qualities. Drawing on work by a number of dance scholars, we have outlined a broad range of qualities which, following Dixon Gottschild, we are calling Africanist. We are not necessarily claiming that polyrhythms are always present in the work of British-based dancers who are black, or that the dancers are all cool, or have soul, or are religious. What we are nevertheless arguing is that dance and music traditions which exemplify these qualities have spread around the world as a result of the African diaspora. They persist because, faced with the dehumanising effects of racism, they offer powerful means for expressing a positive sense of what it is to be human. They can be found in British works that span the broad range of different approaches outlined earlier.

When we first invited Namron to teach an open class for the Roadshow in Leeds, he was very insistent that there should be a live accompanist. We were fortunate that Dougie Thorpe, a former member of Phoenix Dance Company, was able to play for Namron. At the start

of the masterclass, Edward Lynch spontaneously joined Dougie and together they beat out a driving polyrhythmic accompaniment. In the open discussion later, people commented on the way some of the dancers responded more openly to the energy of the drums than others. Someone noted that Namron never counted beats but talked the rhythm instead as ‘boom tiki tiki’. Namron said, a good musician is half of the class. Francis Angol, teaching his class in Liverpool, also vocalised rhythms as ‘shoom pah pah’. Not counting but talking the rhythm was a way of encouraging the class to think with their body, as Barbara Browning puts it. This is an Africanist quality, and the dancing that expresses this has soul and spirit. This is surely a much more useful topic for research than the question, ‘what is black dance?’.

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- (1) Hermin McIntosh (2000) Time for change: a framework for the development of African people’s dance forms. p.5
- (2) Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer (1988) De Margin and De Centre, pp.2-10
- (3) Barbara Browning (1995) Samba. p.13
- (4) Robert Farris Thompson (1987) An aesthetic of the cool: West African dance p.105
- (5) Brenda Dixon Gottschild. (2003) The Black dancing Body from Koon to Cool. p.223.