

Taking the plunge: dance and diversity, 30 years on

Photo: Gabriel Celya



Beverley Glean,
Artistic Director, IRIE!
dance theatre, speaks
candidly on tackling
issues of culture and
diversity in the UK

“The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”⁽¹⁾

There’s no question that tackling issues of culture and diversity with a view to making a significant difference is a major challenge. This is demonstrated by organisations and institutions the world over. Seriously embedding the practice creatively and operationally into your organisation or day-to-day independent practice takes great strength and determination.

The past 30 years have been a remarkable journey of learning and discovery for IRIE! dance theatre and myself. This has not been plain sailing, with resistance and disappointment

along the way. However, the process has allowed for deliberation and self-evaluation, resulting in a more inclusive and creative way of thinking which, ultimately, has affected change.

At the core of IRIE!’s mission lies the need to heighten the profile of African Peoples Dance (APD) and dancers working in those styles in the UK. IRIE! subscribes to the definition of APD as outlined in Hermin McIntosh’s Time for Change Report⁽²⁾ January 2000:

“... that which draws its main influence, sensitivities, means of expression and technical base from the cultural heritage of Africa and the people’s of Africa living in the Diaspora.”

The changing nature of society, particularly in the cultural industries, provides some of the strongest arguments for this approach. It is difficult for dance to be seen as progressive if sections of the population are not fairly represented and little value is set against their cultural and creative practice beyond

a certain level. Therefore, it’s critical to build understanding across areas such as training, advocacy, leadership, partnerships and performance.

To realise this the main driver underpinning our work has been and continues to be to look at the place of cultural diversity in dance training in the UK. By focusing on the awareness and provision of African and Caribbean styles we have created a developmental plan to raise the profile of African and Caribbean dance, addressing issues of inequality within dance education and practice across the sector.

Central to this has been the devising and delivery of an accredited training programme and, in 1998, we recruited a body of students and set about delivering a Diploma in African and Caribbean dance. The first of its kind, the significance of this development in diverse dance training caught the attention of Arts Council England who funded the programme for three years. This also supported the drive towards what we describe as



Photo: Hannah Jetschmann



Photo: Nasmin Khanam

'inspired partnerships'. The Diploma was franchised to City & Islington College (CANDI) and validated by Open College Network (OCN) and Birkbeck College, University of London.

Throughout the three-year funded process, using reflection as a tool for improving and advancing our strategy enabled further investigation and more detailed research. This led, in 2004, to an action research project entitled Dance and Diversity, which was funded for three years by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). This became the catalyst for the Foundation Degree in Dance (FDD), with particular focus on diverse dance styles delivered in partnership with CANDI and London Metropolitan University.

Both initiatives were undertaken jointly with my colleague Rosie Lehan, Senior Lecturer at CANDI, course leader for FDD and joint artistic director of Connectingvibes, the performance company integral

to the course. Rosie and myself have worked on a number of creative projects, throughout the 1980s and to date. The partnership has provided space to share complementary skills and act as a sounding board for each other's creative ideas. We work independently, but not in isolation. Sharing similar thoughts on arts, culture and training has led to many successful developments.

Interestingly, throughout the journey, we have had to find ways to communicate this groundbreaking work. Once we had established who we needed to influence and who the stakeholders were, we quickly learnt to seize opportunities by identifying advocates for the work, sharing platforms and developing pathways in which to discuss and disseminate the research.

We work tirelessly to engage individuals, Further & Higher Education, funders, agencies, companies and people working in related practices. Transforming the information into action made the

programme tangible. It provided a real sense of achievement for us both.

We recognised that diversity exists in all cultural groups and understanding this is a journey that begins with oneself. However, I have found that simply being aware doesn't necessarily translate into automatic change. Experience has taught me that those who hold dance in the community at their core appear to better recognise the fundamental need to be able to experience and understand the cultural differences and practices of others.

I recall sharing a platform with Shobana Jeyasingh in the early 1990s, as part of a discussion panel on the development of dance. At the end of the Q&A Shobana added her hope for the dance community to embrace her contemporary dance practice in the same way the nation had embraced 'chicken tikka masala' (or words to that effect). While the audience responded with laughter, there was a definite connection. The embracing of culture through food, >>



Photo: Mark Simmons

music, architecture and visual arts is seemingly more progressive than in dance, particularly dance of the African Diaspora.

This may well have to do with the style being viewed as an unsophisticated community activity rather than an art form:

“Unlike ballet and some contemporary dance expression, which developed under patronage in formal studios, schools and companies the form developed in our communities in everyday social spaces”.(3)

I say this because while there was a rising visibility of the style in the 1980s it's not until recently that conversations addressing the benefits of APD and its practice to our society in the UK have started to occur. Organisations such as People Dancing, ADAD (now part of One Dance UK), Serendipity, my own IRIE! dance theatre and individuals like Funmi Adewole, Judith Palmer, Ramsay Burt and Christy Adair – along with many others – have contributed to the debate and progressed the agenda through initiatives such as national and international conferences, exhibitions, roadshows, research and publications, performance, community engagement and training.

Looking back, the Dance & Diversity research programme formed the framework for what we have achieved in mainstream education to date. After sharing our findings at the end of phase one (2004–2005), we realised we had to find practical measures

to cultivate a climate for change. Creativity, culture and diversity have to be seen as an organic process and should not be imposed. Therefore, the chance to establish the FDD after phase two (2006–2007): expanding the research internationally to examine the training systems of Cuba, Ghana, Jamaica and the USA was another milestone. We found that change in this context needed to come from the top down. Higher Education provided credibility and a good foundation from which to move forward.

Structured reflection has served us well as a tool to improve and refine our work; but often, through such discussion, Rosie and myself contemplate why we felt this overwhelming need to undertake this work and what the process has taught us. What we definitely know now is that finding a connection is critical and this can be something as simple as having a mutual idea. We have learnt that a creative and/or cultural mismatch can lead to a difficult and regretful creative learning experience.

Increased cultural awareness comes through honest, respectful and meaningful interaction designed to empower individuals to learn from and celebrate difference. We are greatly encouraged by what has resulted from this significant advancement for the dance community and for community dance.

The process has enabled growth in my ability to debate, practice, educate and advocate. I am enthusiastic about

the future. This is as much to do with my own development: having undertaken the Dance & Diversity research, I am more self-aware and feel better placed to make informed professional decisions about the art form that is my heritage.

I am proud of the connections and networks that have contributed to our practice over many years. A noteworthy connection is the Re:generations(4) series of biennial international conferences, started in 2010, which address the development of Dance of the African Diaspora in the UK and the world. From delivering workshops to advising on strategies; my interaction as a mentor, adviser, trustee and trainer has encouraged individuals and organisations to explore their attitudes and beliefs about culturally diverse dance styles, in particular African and Caribbean dance.

Conversations are taking place; articles and books are being written; the creative practice is becoming more visible; and accredited learning in culturally diverse dance is growing. The journey towards increased cultural understanding requires continual consideration of other individuals' and communities' life issues that are different from our own; this will give us objectivity and greater optimism for the future.

Info

beverley.glean@iriedancetheatre.org
www.iriedancetheatre.org
+44(0)20 8691 6099

References

1. Alan Wilson Watts (2011) *Wisdom Of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*
2. Hermin McIntosh (2000) *Time for change: a framework for the development of African people's dance forms*. Arts Council England
3. Beverley Glean and Rosie Lehan (2011) *Pathways to education and employment through APD*. Animated: Spring 2011
4. Re:generations International Conference. A series of biennial academic and artistic conferences which aim to share current practice and research in the field of dance of the African Diaspora (DAD). www.onedanceuk.org/