

An idea lives on... the generation of generations through Community Dance

Louise Katerega, Associate Artist of People Dancing meets Gail Parmel, Artistic Director of ACE dance and music, along with Musical Director Ian Parmel and Education Officer Iona Waite, as part of Voice and Presence, Louise's collaborative project aiming to acknowledge, amplify and celebrate the influence of women of colour in participatory dance

Follow Floodgate Street through Birmingham's Creative Quarter and, amidst the artful graffiti, you'll see the banner heralding ACE's combined studio, performance and office space.

Peep through the door, you'll see the final rehearsals for their latest community dance showcase: Olivia's Quest, a 21st century re-imagining of Oliver Twist as a young girl from Birmingham.

Take a look centre stage. You'll see an 87-strong community cast, aged four to adult, absorbing instruction from Iona Waite, ACE professional company member and Education Officer. Behind her, Musical Director Ian Parmel captures footage on his iPhone while supporting parents look on with pride. But what strikes me immediately is the quiet; a very full room, full of an easy discipline. All, regardless of age, are relaxed yet respectful of the artistic process. Gail and Ian, company leaders, appear almost superfluous...then, suddenly, a young performer with a nose-bleed needs our attention. Gail seats her beside me and I too find my place in proceedings - proffering tissues until she slips without fuss back into the run-through. I smile at how at home I feel. And a sense of home, I am about to discover, is the essence of the ACE experience.

Next day, I attend one of three sell-out Olivia's Quest shows at mac Birmingham.

Almost genre defying, it uses the

stage musical Oliver as inspiration for a full-length narrative dance performance with the original songs as well as composed and popular music. Film and text occasionally flesh out the story. Each class on ACE's participatory programme showcases the precision and dynamic range ACE are known for through singular and blended African, Caribbean, contemporary and street styles. In ACE's re-telling, Olivia, unlike Oliver, not only gains a (female) parent-figure but is welcomed into her community of market traders. The finale is Consider Yourself (At Home), which appears much earlier in the original musical. We, the audience, mostly local, mostly African-Caribbean - "50 per cent of whom have never set foot in a theatre," according to Gail - are in no doubt these words are meant for us too. The feeling I had in rehearsal expands through to auditorium.

A few days later, I join Gail, Ian and Iona in the meeting room at ACE Space, keen to hear about the 21-year journey to the high quality work I have witnessed. I begin by asking why, when Gail and Ian began ACE in 1996, they pledged to always divide their energies equally between participatory and performance dance? Both speak passionately.

Gail begins: "We realised [when we were in another Birmingham-based African-Caribbean dance company] that no one in the community, even

the building next door, knew anything about it. We always said, when we start our company, one thing needs to happen: we are taking our community with us. Without that, there's no audience, no longevity; a company dies."

Ian continues: "ACE wasn't about just a professional company. It was always about the next generation. We felt no one was investing. We couldn't see who was going to be after us. Without education and outreach, there are no more artists in any form. All great artists were inspired from somewhere in youth. You must have access from when you are a little person."

Following this vision then, could they pinpoint the 'milestones', the key moments of change in ACE's history, that have taken them from local providers of participatory dance to respected international advisers on it?

"We launched with A Taste of ACE," explains Gail, "which asked 100 children from Birmingham Youth Centres to imagine life in their communities in 2020. A youth group aged 4-20 emerged from this, who performed lots around Birmingham including school tours. Then, in 2004, we became an RFO (Regularly Funded Organisation of Arts Council England) and changed our brand from African Cultural Exchange to ACE. We found ourselves restricted as to programming because the word 'African' seemed to carry the

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Photos: Brian Slater



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assumption of grass skirts and lots of drums! At this point, the youth group split into three: Funky Fusion (age 5-9), Fuse (age 9-11) and ACE Youth (up to early 20s)."

Ian takes up the story, revealing their entrepreneurial aspect: "During 2006, we renovated our building [for a mere £250k, in contrast to better-resourced projects, which achieved far less with larger budgets] and it earns us a lot from studio hire. We began our Adults and Tots group here at ACE Space, which means three generations of families are now accessing our programme!"

Gail then identifies a final shift: "2008 was also significant because ACE Youth performance group were spotted by a Dutch programmer and invited to appear at the Juli Festival, Amsterdam. This led to us generating a conference in the West Midlands examining how different European countries value youth dance. It was a revelation how advanced our practice was and how much more youth dance is established here, so we established an exchange network, Dance=Desir, with French, Swiss and Dutch youth dance companies. We have exchanges every few months with the Dutch company whose members come mostly from Surinam, supporting their two leaders to do as we've done."

So, I ask, is there an 'ACE philosophy' that threads these successes together?

"We actually rarely talk about it

"It's now time to give back and make sure that happens for the ones coming up. I say loud and proud: ACE has changed my life. I know the power of dance and how many more young people's lives can change at any level, professional or not."

publicly," Gail answers hesitantly, "Not to keep it secret. It's just...deep. We have always worked the same way. People talk about 'something special' in the professionals (in dance, music and other arts) we have produced that's been there from when they were little, which they apply in their own work. For example, teaching is never an add-on; the five-year olds can lead an exercise, ACE Youth teach themselves class and some, like Iona, go on to work on our class programme. Whilst we're working with [young people], they don't just get a bit of movement and leave. All the things I know, in terms of being able to create something, choreograph, anything gained from my experience; I found ways to pass that information on to them at a very young age."

Our conversation continues around the values that characterise ACE's work and Iona, now aged 28 but a member of ACE Youth since the age of ten, adds her perspective. Of course, it's hard to boil 21 years of

participatory practice into a soundbite but as we talk, key themes emerge:

- Working in partnership with parents, discussing the 'whole child', not just his/her dancing
- Making ACE Space a 'home from home' with access to all areas: "We're really available. A child is not afraid to come into 'the office chair' for a chat; it's not Dragon's Den! We don't separate ourselves as directors. Eating, schoolwork, siblings are welcome. And everybody cleans!" (Ian)
- Cultivating professionalism: All groups are held to professional company standards with stern words when required, but always with the aim to "build you up, not to knock you down." (Iona)
- Valuing success inside/outside the arts equally: "Ian always says if ACE closed tomorrow you lot could get jobs anywhere. My friend Caprine was telling me just the other day how she used the thinking we gained from ACE in a difficult interview." (Iona)

- Representing the young people's Voice: the title Olivia's Quest came from the participants and ACE have young board members who help to steer their work.

It is clear that the ACE approach is centred firmly on the young people and their development. For those serious about pursuing dance professionally, Gail emphasises the detail and rigour of industry requirements and she seeks advice from fellow professionals to identify and encourage talent. Ian encourages self-confidence and thinking beyond UK shores about employment. With such an appreciation of the challenges of the 'real world' beyond ACE, especially for dancers of colour, it's no surprise to learn their alumni receive 'after-care':

Gail tells me: "At first, when we got people into vocational schools, we said, 'Off you go, you're ready'. But we soon saw in many different ways they needed to keep coming home to ACE for advice; to keep their spirits up, keep their heads together, even when successful. Now we actively encourage returning to the class programme during their training. It's more than paid off for us and them."

Whatever the young people's successes, however, ACE strives to imbue them with 'The Big H': remaining humble, not to be confused with self-effacement; an absence of ego, which allows true openness and

sharing of your talent.

Having arrived back in the present, we look to the future, discussing 'legacy' and Iona's quiet rise to heiress apparent. Gail is emphatic:

"Everyone talks about Rudi [Cole] who has his own company, Humanhood, and Jamal [Burkmar - Winner of the 2016 Matthew Bourne Award] but don't forget Iona has always been here. She was ACE's first Youth Board representative, she's been shadowing, then doing almost everything for years. She's full-time performing and directing... There's a generation of talented girls coming through below her as well."

Iona speaks entertainingly of a moment in her teens when - despite regular truanting - Gail and Ian pointed out her potential and the change in attitude required to fulfill it. She appreciates the level of trust her mother granted ACE to guide her career and is insightful regarding her position with ACE, and her voice and presence in the arts:

"Gail and Ian's 'organic' approach to nurturing talent has equipped me to be seen and heard. Other friends in the arts feel less brave among their White counterparts because they haven't had a role model like Gail or the step by step exposure, e.g. to meetings, I've had. [Leadership] feels natural, unforced.

"It's now time to give back and make sure that happens for the ones

coming up. I say loud and proud: ACE has changed my life. I know the power of dance and how many more young people's lives can change at any level, professional or not. There'll be something in these four walls for everybody. Big shoes to fill, but I'm free to do it my own way and make sure the fundamentals Gail and Ian have embedded grow throughout the company!"

At the entrance to Floodgate Street, a mosaic celebrates the life of John F Kennedy. The quote reads: "Man may die, nations may fall but an idea goes on." Closing our conversation, I joke: "Maybe one day they'll replace his face with yours, Gail!" "No!" she laughs. "Iona's!" And somehow that says it all. The faces of power are changing. The ACE idea is all set to survive and thrive in young and trustworthy hands.

Info

ACE dance and music archive sits with Birmingham Library and they are developing an online aspect of this whereby any ACE alumni will be able to upload their experiences. See www.acedanceandmusic.com You can find out more about Voice and Presence and complete its nationwide survey into the community practices and future needs of women of the African Diaspora at www.communitydance.org.uk/voiceandpresence

People Dancing International Conference: Glasgow 2017

Tramway, 3-5 October 2017

A diverse, global programme will feature world-class artists and leaders in dance and community arts practice from the USA, India, South Africa, Europe and from across the UK. Produced in partnership with Tramway and Scottish Ballet the event offers three days of discussion, performance, networking and taking part for dance artists, leaders and teachers.

Content will focus on: dance for people living with Parkinson's; older people dancing; and cultural identity and sense of place.

For more info and bookings visit

communitydance.org.uk/glasgow2017

