

When someone says, 'I'm not a dancer', I simply don't believe them

US dance artist **Vincent E. Thomas** took time out from his recent flying visit to Glasgow, where he joined us for People Dancing's second international conference. Here he explains his quest to recover something that's in danger of being lost... our natural instinct to move

We can all dance. It's about re-focusing our lens on what dance is and can be. Everybody and 'every body' has the capability to move. As the crucial link between mind, body and spirit, we have a natural instinct for dance; it is our cultural inheritance, whatever culture we are from. We dance to celebrate, to mourn, to give thanks, as ritual and even in the sheer joy of being alive.

And yet, somewhere along the line, this connection to dance has been shifted. How many people say, "I'm not a dancer", that "dance is not something I do". This, in my experience, is especially true for many men, where the simple connection to their social and cultural dancing is not as valued.

So how has this cultural inheritance become, at best, reduced and, at worst, nearly lost? At what point did we disown our rituals, when did we cease to believe in our socialised learning? How was our natural instinct and ability to move taken away from us and how can we reclaim this part of ourselves?

I explored these questions at the Glasgow conference. People Dancing Associate Artist Louise Katerega and her Voice and Presence initiative brought me over to contribute to this ambitious international event, particularly on one of its key themes: 'Cultural identity and sense of place.' I came to Glasgow to share, to listen to the other artists and practitioners and experience what they are doing.

Prominent features of my cultural inheritance (growing up in Edgefield, South Carolina) were the local community centre and our family living room. The community centre was where people of all ages gathered. Whatever the event - community meetings, wedding receptions, funeral repasts, social activities - we somehow ended up dancing. In our living room, I remember my sister and I getting into costumes, dancing and singing to artists on 45rpm records.

Our living room was where I watched and loved the TV show Soul Train. This was the first place I saw positive images of people of colour expressing their culture with confidence through music and dance, rather than portrayed as the subservient maid, or farm hand. They were doing something I loved and identified with and I'd dance along with them, pretending and wishing to be there in the studio.

There were also shows, like Hee Haw and the Lawrence Welk Show, that were less closely aligned to my background but formed part of my ever-widening cultural hinterland, which introduced me to line dancing and ballroom dancing. Now I can see how all of this was to be my foundation, what I know, the root of my dancing and humanity.

Then seeing dance in other cultures helped me understand and value more my own cultural dance experience. It has fuelled my desire to work with people with different histories, different stories, who bring all of this with them in their physical bodies. The point is that our experience is what we have, what we know and what we bring with us. This is hugely important and validates our reason for being. Every individual is creative and has the capability to express themselves, to move... to dance.

As dance practitioners, we find ways to unlock the potential in people to move and dance and maybe understand how people have been socialised to think that they don't have this ability, and to try to shatter the walls they've built around themselves. Through dance we can create and experience limitless possibilities and connect deeply with our humanness. When we dance, we discover what it is to be human.

So, when someone says to me "I'm not a dancer", I simply don't believe them.

