



Sandra Golding and Anna Thomas (background), Dance and Well-being class, mac. Photo: Kate Green.

# Vital practice

**Louise Katerega** talks to Birmingham-based **Sandra Golding** and discovers how she keeps life in her dance practice and dance practice in her life

**It's celebration time for Sandra Golding.** With a chapter in the important new reader *Narratives in Black British Dance* edited by Dr Adesola Akinleye(1) and two exhibitions celebrating her work with elders in her native Birmingham, I am clearly in sync with the rest of the universe as I settle down to interview her at Midlands Arts Centre (mac), home of one of these exhibitions, one bright January afternoon.

My interview is for *Untold Value?*, the national Voice and Presence (V&P) survey of the work, needs and aspirations of women of the African Diaspora in participatory dance. Our conversation reveals a practice so rich and heartfelt, so much in the spirit of

V&P, which sets out to acknowledge, amplify and celebrate these women, I feel compelled to share it in its own right.


It's a practice which evidences that finding a sense of cultural rootedness serves many different people and purposes – not just artistic and not just for those who share a dance form's geographical origins. It speaks of how Africanist perspectives can be overlooked when it comes to the study of dance and health in the West and therefore the unhealthy gap between African diasporic people and dance or related studies which reflect and include them.

Most of all, it shows what happens when we truly invest time

and self in our participatory practice; how rooted, on-going practice grows, flowers, ripens and bears fruit and in this mature state retains a freshness, a vitality we surely all aspire to sustain in our practice as artists and human beings.

**LK: Sandra, tell us about your African Holistic Dance (AHD) practice?**

SG: It's African movement, Caribbean movement and ancient symbolism used for dance, health, energy, work and wellbeing in the community; it's complementary therapeutic dance/movement education with a focus on the individual and their relationship with their bodies and connection with nature. >>



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**LK: How did you develop it?**

SG: It's my own format developed over 10 years which came from my MA in Somatic Practice Assignments at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). Before that, I'd trained in ballet and contemporary dance and had 15 years of experience in African and Caribbean dance as principal dancer/teacher with Kokuma Dance Company(2).

When I went to do my degree, I saw a lot of Africa within the somatic practice, but I did not see it in the books we were learning from. I did find a connection in Continuum, the practice of Emily Conrad(3), who trained with Katharine Dunham(4) and was initiated as Vodou(5) priestess in Haiti, it's fluidity, connection with breath; it's rippling spine movements like 'Yanvolou'(6) which we practiced in Kokuma.

Sandra tells me how, though

her lecturers encouraged her to independent study, they struggled to support with or sign-post her to African writings and resources. Guest lecturer from the States, Martha Eddy inspired her to keep pursuing the path: "She was the first one who identified MY practice to me as somatic. I had never seen it that way before."

**LK: So, what does AHD look like? What happens in a class?**

SG: I offer the techniques. I hold the space. They are free to create. Sometimes I create, they adapt and I adapt their adaptations! It's like conversation. It keeps things accessible. Sometimes they share and demonstrate and learn from each other.

Sandra and I watch a film of her work at mac. I see adults and elders, all women, some seated, some standing.

Some are people of colour, some not. They work in a circle or one-to-one, guided by or holding hands with Sandra. I see rhythmic swaying, grounding through footwork, colourful African fabric used to entice greater creativity and size of movement. I see harmony within and between bodies. I see light, tenderness, joy. Life, in all senses of that word.

Anna Thomas, one of Sandra's longest serving students, tell us:

"One of the main themes in dance sessions is standing in and experiencing our cultural ground – whatever our individual cultural ground might be. In one particular session I had this sense of being really grounded and strong – a feeling of 'this IS who I am, and I have a rightful place on the earth and a purpose to fulfil."

Anna is mature in years, White European and, like several students,



has been connected with Sandra for over a decade. Anna has drawn praise for her African/Caribbean technique from Kokuma's exacting former artistic director, Jackie Guy MBE.

SG: It was at a concert my class did at the Birmingham Symphony Hall celebrating 50 years of Jamaican independence. Anna can dance (my work well) because she has respect for African heritage, she knows it. She understands the Egyptian dance she does elsewhere as African dance. She is proud of her Irish and Welsh heritage. She knows who she is and so can engage with any style."

We talk further about short and long-term effects Sandra's students report, which go beyond the studio. On the list are:

- Pain relief and increased mobility
- Healing during grief

- Therapies, including aromatherapy and massage
- One student studied dance at Coventry University and went on to an MA in dance therapy
- Dance as an important pathway into one woman's religious interfaith ministry. Rev Monica Douglas-Clark: "After working with Sandra I feel connected to my body, empowered, energised and expansive... as a result, in combination with the other modalities I have trained in, I feel able to express myself fully as a creative and sacred business woman."

Sandra is certain and fervent about these secondary, ripple effects dance can have: "Dance is a space where you can release toxins, which allows you to move on. Talking therapy doesn't always work or it's not the time to talk. Some of these traumatised women have gone on to perform and fulfil dreams and perform physical feats they thought they couldn't. It's massive! One lady lost five stone in weight. Dance was a key part of this for her".

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In terms of her own professional achievements AHD has led Sandra into high-flown contexts such as workshops for business in Mayfair and The Spiritual Living Consciousness Retreat in the Centre for Peace, Geneva.

**LK: So – whilst we are all looking back over your career, what are you looking forward to?**

SG: Signposts to the people and funding to develop a community arm and a corporate arm to what I do. I want to archive my work and train others in AHD, deliver workshops and make a new solo work to tour where I've just made some new connections

in South Africa. I am ready to go now. After putting my career on hold to manage a family, it's my time. It's not necessarily what I would have chosen (Sandra's lifetime of achievements sit in the context of her lone parenting), but I am showing up now to fulfil my purpose and for my voice to be heard. I have to stand in my truth and stand in my cultural ground because this is what I teach and encourage. To have a voice, to move on in life."

And there I leave Sandra Golding, ready as ever for the next chapter. Living testimonial to how vital it is in every sense to keep life in your dance practice and dance practice in your life if you want to create and continue a long dance career. A lesson that all forward movement comes from a grounded place.

I pass through the exhibition and note again her poem on the wall:

Walk into the future from  
the ancient past  
I hear you calling, I hear you calling  
Calling me to my destiny  
As I walk strong and proud,  
I'll never forget the sweetness  
of your voice  
Encouraging me to move forward  
Mama Africa I hear you.

Suddenly I feel the warmth of that January sun and recall that all us humans are in fact African diaspora(7). The celebrating and learning from ancestors long gone and still with us, in dance as in life, connects us with healing and humanity. It is the work of us all.

**Info**  
[macbirmingham.co.uk/sandra-golding](http://macbirmingham.co.uk/sandra-golding)  
[movingtubalance.co.uk](http://movingtubalance.co.uk)

#### References

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3. <https://continuummovement.com/emilie-in-dialogue>
4. <http://kdcach.org/katherine-dunham-biography>
5. Vodou is the proper name of the religious practice colonialists called 'voodoo'. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian\\_Vodou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian_Vodou)
- 6) See L'Antoinette Stines, Soul Casings [www.serendipity-uk.com/shop/soul-casings](http://www.serendipity-uk.com/shop/soul-casings)
7. [www.nature.com/scitable/content/out-of-africa-versus-the-multiregional-hypothesis-6391](http://www.nature.com/scitable/content/out-of-africa-versus-the-multiregional-hypothesis-6391)