



The Head Wrap Diaries, Uchenna Dance. Photo: Uchenna Dance

The concept of 'community' and 'professional' dance

Performer, writer and lecturer, **Funmi Adewole**, talks about sustainability of practice, the concept of 'community' and how the way we think about what we do helps us to develop and direct our practice. Does consciously thinking about how we define 'community' enable the practitioner to have a more flexible and sustainable attitude to working in dance and therefore a greater impact?

Changes in infrastructure and the funding of the arts are moments when we, as dance practitioners, stop and reflect on our values, who we are, what we do and why. In 2011, I wrote an article for *Animated* called *More Conversations Please!* in which I reflected on the change of discourse around the African Peoples Dance/Black dance sector over 15 years (1). I stated that conversations in the sector were moving beyond debates questioning the term 'black dance' into other areas. An artistic discourse about the work of Black dancers was emerging which I attributed to the projects of the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora commonly known as ADAD (which merged into the formation of One Dance UK). One project was the *Re:generations* conference, the international conference of dance of the Africa and the Diaspora. The inaugural edition of the conference was in 2010. The erstwhile director of ADAD, Jeanette Bain-Burnett had told me she wanted to encourage the sector to think in terms of being a community of practice. I reported that the sector was operating in this way was apparent at the conference. The dance sector as a whole is again at a moment of change, and reflection - there has been a drop in funding and changes in dance infrastructure. Many conversations in professional development are about sustainability

and resilience. Thankfully there is some important research happening which will help organisations and independent artists find ways of navigating the changing landscape.

There are at least two on-going projects. Mercy Nabirye, Head of Dance of the African Diaspora at One Dance UK has been leading on a mapping exercise of this sector with the aim of gathering information to pin-point its current practices and needs. Mercy points out, due to changes in the arts sector, support organisations cannot take for granted that they know the dance sector needs. Since 2017 individual artists and organisational heads have been interviewed and focus groups have been organised. Louise Katerega's project has focused specifically on participatory (community) practice. As part of her partnership work with *People Dancing, Voice and Presence*, she carried out a survey called *Untold Value* enquiring about the activities, professional relationships and aspirations of community dance artists identifying as women with an African or Diaspora heritage. Both initiatives (in different ways) are looking into how dance artists are developing their own practices in order to know where they need support or to facilitate the sharing of experiences in the field. Findings of both will be shared at the *Re:generations* conference this year. As one of the many dance artists who

took part in both surveys, I continued to think about the issues they raised about sustainability.

From my observations, being part of and engaging with communities has been beneficial to the careers of Black dancers at different points on their journeys and to the dance sector as a whole and I share in this article how I see this play out. 'Community' is a complex and layered term, meaning different things in different places. A factor that seems to be common to most definitions of community is that a community consists of people are considered to be a collective, but this could be on the basis of shared background, heritage, experience, or circumstances. I would like to add the caveat that my descriptions of community should not be taken as being a sociological proven fact but as a banner under which to discuss good practices. With that in mind I wish to discuss three ways of relating to the idea of 'community' by dance artists which I think have been beneficial to them and those around them - 'community dance', communities that dance, and communities of practice.

1. Community dance

'Community dance' has been described as a dance practice in which professional dancers engaged with various communities to create dance performances. Often the process of dance making is given

higher value than the performance. In the 1990s, due to policies, which aligned the work of Black dance artists with social inclusion agendas, some dance artists resented their work being related to the idea of 'community' in any way. Nevertheless, community dance has at times served as a platform that has supported the artistic and cultural appeal of the dance of the African diaspora to be recognised in Britain and participants have recognised its value. When interviewing Louise Katerega about the outcomes of her survey she told me that for several of the respondents there is a synergy between the work they create for touring and artistic events and the work they create with communities. For more than one successful choreographer, their community following provided the financial foundation and audience numbers (live and on-line) to allow the shift from jobbing performers to independent careers creating their own professional work. It also indicated to them the kind of stakeholder relationships they should develop and demonstrated to programmers (all-too-often-surprised at the size and diversity of the new audiences they brought to their venues) these artists' deep understanding of and credibility within communities of colour wherever they went.

2. Communities that dance

Many dance artists who work within dance of the Africa and the Diaspora are part of what I describe here as 'communities that dance'. This is a broad and inadequate description for people invested in particular dance forms as part of their everyday lifestyle. Here dance features as part of religious, familial, recreational or social events and it's not necessarily practiced as a profession. When dancing is embedded in everyday life it comes with philosophies and cultural practices which are a source of creativity and strength for those involved and when people from these communities go into dance as profession they can bring a unique perspective to the professional dance industry. Hakeem Onibudo of Impact Dance, who also has a background in fitness, seeks to develop a sense



of community between people who attend his classes and performances. One of his initiatives is to organise dance holidays, which bring participants from professional dance, recreational dance and the fitness industry together. When it comes to performance, I think of the dance artists of the 1990s who popularised hip-hop as a staged dance form – Benji Ried, Jonzi D, Robert Hylton, Kwesi Johnson, Hakeem Onibudo. Though most of them went on to formally train at dance schools and conservatoires their outlook and understanding of dance came from varied cultural sources (beyond what was offered through their formal dance training), which gave them the wherewithal to forge innovative artistic paths for themselves and others.



3. Communities of practice

The idea of 'communities of practice' is a concept that comes from lifelong education. It was in use around the work of the Black Dance Development Trust in the 1980s or the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora in the mid-1990s, but in retrospect these are what these organisations facilitated. A community of practice is made up of practitioners who "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems" (2). This is a point I mentioned in the 2011 article. Presently, we are witnessing a growing number of artists who run initiatives which promote this kind of community sharing. Alesandra Seutin for example has, for two years running, organised a two-week workshop programme for dance professionals and practitioners at Ecole des Sables in Senegal, the centre of the mother of African contemporary dance, artist Germaine Acogny. It brought dancers from several nations around the world who are invested in the dance of Africa and the Diaspora to learn, experiment, discuss and experience the practices of a cohort of internationally recognised teachers. Professor Ramsay Burt supported my trip to the 2018 edition where we



Clockwise from far left:
 The Head Wrap Diaries, Uchenna Dance.
 Photo: Uchenna Dance
 Freddie Opoku-Addaie.
 Photo: Erin Brown
 Louise Katerega, People Dancing's
 International Conference 2017, Glasgow.
 Photo: Rachel Cherry

Igbokwe and Freddie Opoku-Addaie.
 Vicki Igbokwe is the Founder and Creative Director of Uchenna Dance. The Head Wrap Diaries which she directed, choreographed and co-wrote, is an innovative production which draws on her skills as a choreographer and empowerment specialist. The Head Wrap Diaries, if you have not seen it, is a funny and uplifting dance theatre show about three women and their ongoing

new audiences and the intermingling of different groups of people around this feature have quickly changed their minds.

The choreography of Freddie Opoku-Addaie “juxtaposes instinctive movement, ritualistic folk practices, structured choreography, with rules and parameters of gaming” (3) is a case in question. As a dance-maker he is highly conceptual in his approach as those who have experienced his solo production Show of Hands would agree. It could be briefly described as the performance of minimalist movement on a stage populated by various sized wooden sculptures of hands. However, watching Freddie lead a community movement workshop with his sculptures on the grounds of the Horniman museum (as part of the ADAD Bloom festival) which included little children, parents and elders revealed to me the accessibility of his work when presented from another angle. Says Freddie, he obsessed with how the ‘inanimate animates the animate’, the relationship we have with our surroundings and sound/rhythmic structures. This came from his experiences of living in Ghana when he was young.

I hope this article demonstrates how some Black British practitioners are nurturing dance practices, interrogating both social and artistic imperatives and drawing issues of heritage, leisure, cultural leadership, and professional practice together. This seems to be a good recipe for balance, health and growth in these times. As previously mentioned, many dance artists do not think of their dance in relation to community in these terms exactly. I use these ways of looking at community as means of discussing their versatility and to celebrate a perspective on dance, which should be recognised and embraced.

Info

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References

- (1) Animated Spring 2011
- (2) Smith, M. K. (2003, 2009) ‘Communities of Practice’, the encyclopaedia of informal education, www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm
- (3) Freddieopoku-addaie.com

“A sense of what their work can mean to different communities gives artists the ability to produce various kinds of projects”

jointly facilitated and participated in discussion sessions that were organised by Alesandra as part of the programme. Participants were active in reflecting and articulating their dance practices and addressing political and artistic issues as part of the dancing and cultural experience.

Community and Versatility

Artists who engage with community in these ways can move in and out of different cultural spheres and approach the practice of dance from multiple perspectives. For these artists the relationship between community and dance is varied and does not constitute a single rigid configuration. A sense of what their work can mean to different communities gives artists the ability to produce various kinds of projects - artistic, socially engaged, community-focused, educational or experimental. To illustrate this point I will discuss briefly the work of Vicki

relationship with hair. It mixes dance, theatre and storytelling with a good dose of humour. The performance venue is transformed into a hair salon, with wig stands and chairs set around a performing space. Vicki vividly brought to the stage the sociality that is often produced in places where women do their hair in African and Caribbean communities in particular. She invited the general public into the experience by setting up a ‘Head Wrap Bar’, along with the performances. ‘The Head Wrap Bar,’ which was usually in the theatre foyer (post show), was a place where members of the audience could do such things as meet the company, share experiences, learn and share different ways of tying head wraps, and look at an exhibition of specially commissioned art (pre show). On occasion, Vicki has had to work hard to bring some venues around to seeing the relevance of ‘The Head Wrap Bar’. The appearance of