



# **BRITISH DANCE** **BLACK ROUTES**

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This document has been produced by York St John University to accompany the British dance: Black routes Symposium held at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 25 October, 2013.

## Introduction

In her introduction to the 2007 book *Voicing Black Dance: the British Experience* Funmi Adewole recalls an incident when she had been invited to give a visiting lecture at a London Dance Conservatoire. She began her talk by asking the students what they knew about Black dance artists and they named a number of African American choreographers and companies. When she gave them the names of British dance companies they had not heard of any of them, even ones that were touring at the time. British-based dancers who are Black have made rich and significant contributions to the British dance world since the middle of the twentieth century, but as Adewole's anecdote illustrates they remain largely unknown. The ideas behind performances by Black British dancers and companies were often misunderstood by dance critics and subsequently their work has been largely ignored by those writing British dance history. One of the aims of the British Dance and the African Diaspora research project is to write Black British dance artists and their legacies back into history. We highlight the diversity of dance styles and the rich contribution the many artists, featured in the exhibition *British dance: Black routes*, have made to British dance, bringing together a range of thematically organised material.

The research project, of which this exhibition is a part, aims to find new ways of generating and recording memories from those involved in professional dance activity. It also seeks to celebrate the achievements of Black dancers whose histories are often overlooked, to re-contextualise the work of Black British dancers and to add to the transatlantic knowledge of African cultural diasporas. Research material was gathered during Roadshows held in Leeds and Liverpool which explored memories of Black British dancers who were involved with dance from the 1970s onwards with particular focus in Leeds on Phoenix Dance Company and in Liverpool on Movement Angol and Delado. A further Roadshow in Birmingham focused on ACE dance and music and Kokuma Dance Theatre Company. Master classes, focus groups, panel discussions, film showings and performances were offered in each Roadshow. It is the past legacies and contributions to new vocabularies and current artistic practices that we are investigating in the project. The research material from these events informed the themes in the exhibition.

The abundance of information and resources about African American dancers has overshadowed the achievements of Black British dancers and companies. The poor quality of critical writing about the latter has made it difficult to recognise the specificity of Black British experiences as these have expressed themselves in choreography and performance. This specificity in turn derives from the different routes through which African diasporic dance and music forms have come to Britain. Although there have been Black people living in Britain since at least Shakespeare's time, the majority of Black British people are from families who came to Britain from British colonies in the Caribbean. There were also immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana and other British colonies in Africa. Felix Cobson and George Dzikunu (artistic director of Adzido) from Ghana and Peter Badejo (artistic director of Badejo Arts) from Nigeria disseminated dance culture from West Africa and made significant contributions to British dance. The founders of Phoenix Dance Company, Francis Angol of Movement Angol, Bob Ramdhanie and Jackie Guy directors of Kokuma and Gail and Ian Parmel directors of ACE dance and music are either from the Caribbean or have Caribbean heritage and have also influenced dance developments.

This socio-political context makes the work of British-based dancers who are Black different from the work of Black dancers in the United States. Books about African American dance often position slavery and the chain gang as a point of origin. The Civil Rights movement and the Black Arts movement in the United States are important for understanding the background for the work of artists like Alvin Ailey, Eleo Pomare and others. The abomination of slavery is not a key reference point for British dancers who came from African countries that were until the 1950s and 1960s British colonies. The social and political context of the work of Black British dancers has been the problems arising from the effects of colonialism. The education system in these countries was modelled on the same syllabi taught in Britain and as colonial or, later, Commonwealth citizens, they looked to Britain as the mother country. While those who migrated did not have to fight for civil rights in the way African Americans had to do, they nevertheless experienced racism and discrimination. The marginalisation of Black British dance artists compounds these experiences. That is why the British Dance and the African Diaspora research project seeks to celebrate the achievements of British-based dancers who are Black.

The range of dance practices of the artists mentioned above indicate the diversity of the routes through which Diasporic African dance and music forms have come to Britain. African Peoples Dance and Dance of the African Diaspora are terms that categorise dance forms rather than defining the people who practice them. Hip Hop and Jazz dance, for example, are forms that are danced by members of a broad range of different ethnic groups (including those of white ethnicity). Yvonne Daniel suggests that there are identifiable qualities within Diaspora performance which 'highlight movement that has an intimate relationship with music, visual art, history and cosmology' (2011:14/15).

The exhibition presents the broad diversity of dance forms that draw on and develop diasporic African dance practices and shows the complex ways in which British-based dancers who are Black make hybrid connections and identifications.

By giving an overview of this diversity of practices and revealing some of the cultural context of their work, this exhibition aims to address the nexus of aesthetic, institutional and conceptual problems that have rendered these dancers and their work invisible. Through understanding these the exhibition proposes a new basis for re-evaluating work within the sector and for rewriting its history, acknowledging the distinctive contribution these dancers have offered to British dance.

We would like to acknowledge the following people who have contributed to this exhibition and research project: Dr Richard Benjamin, Head of International Slavery Museum, National Museums Liverpool; Lucy Johnson, Exhibitions Officer, National Museums Liverpool; Stephen Carl-Lokko, Collections Development Officer, National Museums Liverpool; Bill Harpe, Director of the Black-E; Sue Lancaster, freelance dancer and workshop leader; Karen Gallagher, Director of Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI); Maxine Brown, Community Dance Artist, MDI; Wieke Eringa, CEO and Artistic Director of Yorkshire Dance; Sharon Watson Artistic Director of Phoenix Dance Company; Jeanette Bain, Director of Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD); Paul Burns Director of Programming and Production at DanceXchange; Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC); De Montfort University; York St John University.

**Professor Christy Adair** -  
York St John University

**Professor Ramsay Burt** -  
De Montfort University

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## British dance: Black routes

This exhibition explores the experiences of Black British dancers from 1946 to 2005 and highlights their contribution to British dance. There is a variety of different dance forms practiced in Britain today such as jazz, contemporary, ballet, hip-hop and African Peoples Dance. Some of these have come to Britain along the many different routes taken by the families of today's Black British citizens many of whom came from the Caribbean in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Some of these dance and music forms travelled along the transatlantic slave routes from Africa to the USA and Caribbean on their way to Britain. Others have come direct from Africa with recent Commonwealth immigrants.

Although the actual dances are different from one another, they have qualities in common such as multiple rhythms, and high energy presented in a cool way. When Black Britons have suffered from racism, dancing has offered a powerful means for affirming positive ways of being Black.

## Routes from Africa – history and context:

Dance and music have come to Britain from Africa along many different routes. Les Ballets Negres, the first European dance company founded by Black dancers, was formed in London in 1946 by Berto Pasuka who came to Britain from Jamaica in the wave of post-war Caribbean immigration. In the 1960s and 70s, National Dance Companies from newly independent West African countries began visiting Britain. They introduced British audiences and dancers to the way Africans were developing modern, theatrical ways of staging dances which they had collected in many different communities from across the region. Around this time, African American modern dancers were also teaching and performing in Britain.

In the 1970s and 80s the children of some post-war Caribbean immigrants were attracted to African forms, others to modern dance from the US. Many went on to found a number of companies, particularly in the Midlands and north of England.

## Phoenix

In 2000 Phoenix Dance Company presented a gala performance *Trip Through Time* in the grounds of Harewood House, near Leeds. Although the performance made no direct reference to it, this grand 18th century country house and estate was built by the Lascelles family with a fortune made from financing the slave trade and from sugar plantations in Barbados.

## Beverley Glean: Irie!

*Let Reggae Touch Your Soul* was choreographed in a fusion of contemporary, African and Caribbean dance forms with live reggae music. Presenting a history of reggae, it explored its sound, style, language and fashion and celebrated its influence on pop music and dance world-wide.

## MAAS Movers

The Minority Arts Advisory Service (MAAS) started MAAS MOVERS in 1977. The dance company's mission statement included: 'More and more Black talent is pouring out of Dance Schools and finding no outlet. The MAAS MOVERS provide the opportunity for this talent to find its outlet and to be developed'.

## Jonzi D Aeroplane Man

Jonzi D's *Aeroplane Man* (1995) is a man's journey in search of his roots traced through hip-hop dance, music and rap lyrics.

## Photowall (Images of dancers)

**Peter Badejo** from Nigeria and **Koffi Koko** from Benin, are dancers who established their reputation in West Africa before working in Europe. Koko, who started working in France and Germany in the 1970s, and Badejo, who moved to Britain in 1990, have both had a strong influence on the development of African Peoples Dance in Britain.

**Francis Angol** explores how dress codes affect how we judge one another in *Rituals of Entrapment* (2006).

Francis Angol in *Physically Masculine* (2007) explores male rites of passage and the relationships between fathers and sons.

**Jeanefer Jean-Charles** and **Pearl Jordan** formed Bullies Ballerinas Jazz in 1990 and for ten years directed popular performances of jazz dance in the UK and abroad.

**Sharon Wrey** dancing the solo *Harmonica Breakdown* (1995) choreographed and originally danced by Jane Dudley in 1939. The work was Dudley's response to the Depression of middle America inspired by Sonny Terry's music.

**Hopal Romans** in *Knot Annulled*. Choreographed by Doug Elkins for Union Dance.

*Face Our Own Face* (1993) was choreographed by Phoenix Dance Company member Pamela Johnson. The performance was constructed around a large metal sculpture outline of a woman. Johnson was challenging both representations of women and perspectives of blackness.

## Indicative Timeline

(this is an extended version of the exhibition panel)

### 1946

Les Ballets Negres open at the Twentieth Century Theatre, Westbourne Grove, London, April 30th.

### 1948

Katherine Dunham Dance Company has its first season in London.

The musical *Calypso* opens in London. Nicholas Brothers perform at the Royal Variety Performance at the Palladium Theatre, London.

### 1953

Les Ballets Negres' final season.

### 1957

Pearl Primus presents her work at the Princes Theatre, London.

### 1962

The Chubby Checker Show on Associated Television.

### 1963

Namron joins Willesden Jazz Ballet.

### 1964

First London performances by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

### 1965

The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica performs in London as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival and tours the UK.

Felix Cobson arrives from Ghana and later founded Aklowa.

### 1967

Donald McKayle's company presents *Black New World* at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh.

### 1968

Bill Harpe produces multicultural dance performance as part of the opening celebrations of the Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool.

### 1969

William Louther arrives from the United States to join London Contemporary Dance Theatre.

### 1974

George Dzikunu arrives from Ghana. Peter Blackman forms Steel 'n Skin who offer educational workshops.

### 1975

*Ipi Tombi*, from South Africa, opens at Her Majesty's Theatre, London, 19 November. Lanzel founded in Wolverhampton.

### 1976

Elroy Josephz takes up a post at I.M. Marsh teacher Training College, Liverpool. Barrington Anderson founds Ekome in Bristol.

### 1977

MAAS Movers, a contemporary dance company, is founded by the Minority Arts Advisory Service.

Kokuma founded in Birmingham by Bob Ramdhanie.

Ghana's National Dance Ensemble perform at the Alhambra, Bradford.

### 1978

Patricia Banton wins choreographers award for MAAS Movers.

Carl Campbell, Company 7 formed.

### 1979

Steel 'n Skin's Liverpool residency – subject of documentary film by Steve Shaw for Arts Council of Great Britain.

### 1981

Maxine Brown is one of the founder members of Delado in Liverpool.

Phoenix Dance Company founded.

### 1982

Will Gaines performs at the ICA, London.

### 1983

Mama Lou Parks performs in London. Chuck Green, Honi Coles & Will Gaines recorded performance at Riverside Studios for Channel 4, 3-part programme *Masters of Tap*.

### 1984

Terry Monahan starts Jiving Lindyhoppers who give their first performance at the Notting Hill Carnival.

First London visit of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Adizdo founded by George Dzikunu.

### 1985

Black Dance Development Trust's first summer school is held in Leicester.

Beverley Glean forms Irie! Dance Theatre. Union Dance, Dance Company 7, Ekome, Great Indian Dancers, Oranim & Fusion perform at GLC 'Arts in Danger Campaign' at the Royal Festival Hall.

### 1986

Bode Lawal creates Sakoba Company.

Judith Palmer joins Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble.

State of Emergency created by Deborah Baddoo.

### 1987

Brenda Edwards and Noel Wallace created roles in Ulysees Dove's *Episodes* commissioned by London Festival Ballet.

Carol Straker Dance Company is formed.

*Parallels in Black* – two programmes of work by six postmodern African American choreographers (Blondell Cummings, Ralph Lemon, Fred Holland, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Bebe Miller, and Jowale Willa Jo Zollar) presented at The Place Theatre, London.

## 1988

Jackie Guy appointed Artistic Director of Kokuma Performing Arts.

'H' Patten dances in Adizido's production of *Coming Home*.

## 1989

*Salut: Black Expression on the South Bank*, Rex Nettleford gives a lecture.

## 1990

Peter Badejo forms Badejo Arts.

Bullies Ballerinas formed.

*Five Guys Named Moe*, first London production at Stratford East.

## 1991

Bunty Mathias gains UK Choreography Award.

## 1992

Sheron Wray founds Jazz Exchange.

Closure of Black Dance Development Trust.

Paul Liburd joins Rambert Dance Company.

## 1993

*What is Black Dance in Britain?*

*A Meeting for practitioners*. Nottingham Playhouse, March.

RJC Company formed in Leeds.

## 1994

Kompany Malakhi founded by Kwesie Johnson.

Hilary Carty Director of Dance, Arts Council England.

Association of Dancers of the African Diaspora ADAD founded.

## 1995

Jonzi D performs *Aeroplane Man*, as part of *Lyrical Fear*, at the Place Theatre, London.

Patrick Acogny appointed Artistic Director of Kokuma Dance Company.

## 1996

ACE dance and music established in Birmingham directed by Gail and Ian Parmel.

Dolly Henry formed Dance and Music Theatre Company, Body of People aka BOP with Jazz musician Paul Jenkins.

Vivien Freakley directs Black Dance Choreographic Initiative.

Susan Lewis gains UK Choreography Award.

## 1999

Robert Hylton forms Urban Classicism.

Phoenix Dance Company's Anniversary Tour *19 Rewind and Come Again*.

*Lion King* opens in London.

Henry Oguike Dance Company formed.

## 2000

Hermin McIntosh writes the report *Time for change: a framework for the development of African peoples dance forms* for the Arts Council.

## 2001

Brenda Edwards is Artistic Director of first Hip Festival.

Ballet Black founded.

David Bryan directs Nubian Steps at the South Bank.

Marie Ryan, Joanne Moven and Rommi Smith form Wild Roots Collective.

## 2002

Francis Angol formed Movement Angol. Zoo Nation Dance Company founded.

## 2003

Kenneth Olumuyiwa Tharp is awarded OBE for services to dance.

## 2004

Bawren Taviziva forms Tavaziva Dance Company.

Namron performs his solo *Missing* at the Edinburgh Festival.

## 2005

Adzido lose their funding.

## 2005

Robert Hylton presented Contrast at Breakin' Convention, Sadler's Wells Theatre.

## Glossary

African Peoples Dance (APD). An approach to dancing that, in the 1960s, came out of the work of companies in newly independent West African countries like the National Dance Companies of Ghana and Nigeria. These companies researched and adapted for the stage 'traditional' dances that came from different nations and groups in these countries.

Jazz dance. Like jazz music, to which it is often performed, the label jazz dance covers a range of dancing styles developed by African Americans from the early twentieth century including tap and much of the dancing in musicals.

Tap dance. A highly rhythmic, percussive dancing style, often danced with shoes with solid wooden or leather soles. It is said to have originated in the United States in the late 19th century when African Americans brought an African sense of rhythm to Irish step dancing and Lancashire clog dancing. Street dance. A name for a range of urban styles of dancing that began in the 1970s in the streets of New York and other US cities, often using hip-hop music.

'Cool'. A quality of detachment in performance where the face remains calm and nonchalant despite the fact that the rest of the body is working fast and hard at executing complicated movements.

Contemporary dance (sometimes also called modern dance). This is a professional dance style that originated in the early years of the 20th century in Europe and the United States as a more 'modern' alternative to ballet.

## Did the critics get it right?

British critics writing about performances by Black dancers have often been highly enthusiastic. The dancers themselves have sometimes used these apparently glowing statements to advertise their work. There are dangers, however, that these can sometimes seem to reinforce the idea that Black people are natural dancers. The Nigerian-born choreographer and dance teacher Peter Badejo complained that the subtlety that is found in traditional African dances gets lost when artists cater for low audience expectations. Too many dancers, he said, have adopted an 'all sweat and no brains style of dancing'. What worries him about dancers working with African forms is also sometimes true of Black British dancers working with modern western dance forms. These quotes perhaps betray white peoples' simultaneous fear and fascination with black bodies, which are often seen as exotically different. Black and white audiences both seem to value the energy, emotion, and spontaneity of Black dancers. But do they appreciate them for different reasons?

Do Black people see these as positive contributions to the development of society, while for white people are they enviable qualities that only Blacks have?

*The vigour of the performers is exhilarating.'*

*'An exuberant exploration of Southern African history.'*

*'The energy is irresistible. The sheer exuberance of the dancers really does hook the audience.'*

*'I found the spoken poems in between the dancers a shade sententious and pompous, but they were overshadowed anyway by the pulsing excitement of the drums and the dance itself.'*

*'Bubbling brown sugar meets liquid ebony.'*

*'Every moment vibrates with energy and power that leaves the audience exhausted and marvelling.'*

*'Raw and powerful, an explosion of pent-up inner-city energies'*

*'An explosion of noise, colour and energy.'*

*'There was a lot of rhythmic action and boogeying on down but it didn't go anywhere. Interesting nevertheless.'*

*'Five young snappy dancers in classes and around the festival, hanging loose, being cool and upfront.'*

*'Their strongest side is not their technique... but their lack of reserve and the intensity with which they do things.'*

## Rhythm

The videos on this loop show three British Caribbean artists working with rhythm in dance. Video examples from Edward Lynch, Namron's Open Class in Leeds and Francis Angol's Open Class at the Black-E.

Kariamua Welsh Asante: 'Rhythm remains the central core to any expression of African culture and consequently the center of any analysis that is conducted'.

Yvonne Daniel: 'soft or flexed knees, a gentle, forward-tilted back, polyrhythmic body-part articulations, and a cool or controlled approach within an extensive range of dynamics'.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild: 'Rhythm, percussive drive, pulse, breath, and heartbeat play a pivotal role in generating and disseminating soul power.'

## Community & Spirituality

Dance and music are an important means through which Black communities celebrate shared cultural values. This was recognised in the 1970s and 80s when many dance companies first received funding from local government. This was not, however, because their work was considered important as art but because they were seen as a way of reducing racial tensions in communities in the aftermath of serious disturbances across the country in places such as Bradford, Brixton, and Toxteth. Dancing has a much deeper meaning for Black British communities. Africans, when they were enslaved in the Americas, kept alive their cultural traditions through dance and music. These became important because they had been deprived of any objects or material that could remind them of their roots. Black people have continued using and reinventing these forms in order to retain and express their African heritage.

Communities have found and continue to find a sense of security through practicing dance and music which often contains spiritual significance. Churches have been particularly important for maintaining a sense of community, self-worth and belonging, especially when Black communities have been subject to racist discrimination. Many Black British dancers see spirit and spirituality as an important aspect of their dance expression.

### Photographs:

Broadwater Farm Defence Campaign Poster  
Most Black British dance companies were initially funded in the 1980s as part of initiatives to improve community relations. This poster shows that the dance company Irie! performed in a concert supporting the Broadwater Farm Defence League, which had been formed to secure the release of the Tottenham Three. Wrongly convicted of killing PC Blakelock in the riots of 1985 their convictions were over-turned in 1991.

### Phoenix 'Catch The Spirit' Poster

'Phoenix Dance Company aims to share the spirit of dance across the divisions of a multicultural society' - Company mission statement, 1992.

### Kokuma photograph

In 1988 Kokuma Performing Arts received £90,000 from Birmingham City Council, £6,000 from the West Midlands Arts Association and £12,000 from the Arts Council of Great Britain. These figures illustrate that the majority of funding was for the Company's Unemployed Youth Activities (UYAs) rather than for its artistic work.

### ACE *En-trance* photograph

*En-trance* (2004) explored African and Caribbean spiritual practices that involve trance. Its starting point was the discovery by Gail Parmel, Artistic Director of ACE Dance, that the beats per minute in the repetitious rhythms which encourage trance states are present in both African dance forms and urban club and rave music.

Bristol-based Ekomé Dance Company during a schools project. Many Black British dance companies were frequently expected to provide temporary activities for unemployed youths. They also found a lot of work running educational projects.

### Elroy Josephz

'The jazz came out of oppression of Black people and very often it was either a release, or a cry for help...and it was ridden with emotion, if you take the emotion out of it, forget it... it's got to be packed, it's got to be, it's got to be human, it's got to be alive.' Taken from *Elroy Josephz: A Tribute*

Born into a theatrical family, Elroy Josephz was a dancer, teacher, actor and producer who came to Britain from Jamaica in the 1950s.

Beginning his career in London with Les Ballet Negres in 1952, Elroy went on to perform in a variety of musical and television productions including *West Side Story* and *Doctor Who* in 1970.

He toured his own professional dance company throughout Europe from 1967 to 1970, developing his own style of dance which fused African Caribbean forms with those of Europe and Asia. Central to his work was his understanding of the historical importance of transatlantic slavery and its legacies.

Elroy believed this history gave his work a power and emotion essential to his style of dance.

Jospehz taught dance to students in both Liverpool and London becoming one of the UK's first Black dance lecturers in 1979 at what is now Liverpool John Moores University.

Today his story is largely absent from the history of British dance, despite playing a central role in changing how modern dance is both taught and performed. However, since his death in 1997 his legacy has lived on through the work of former colleagues and students throughout Liverpool and the UK.



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For further information please visit  
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