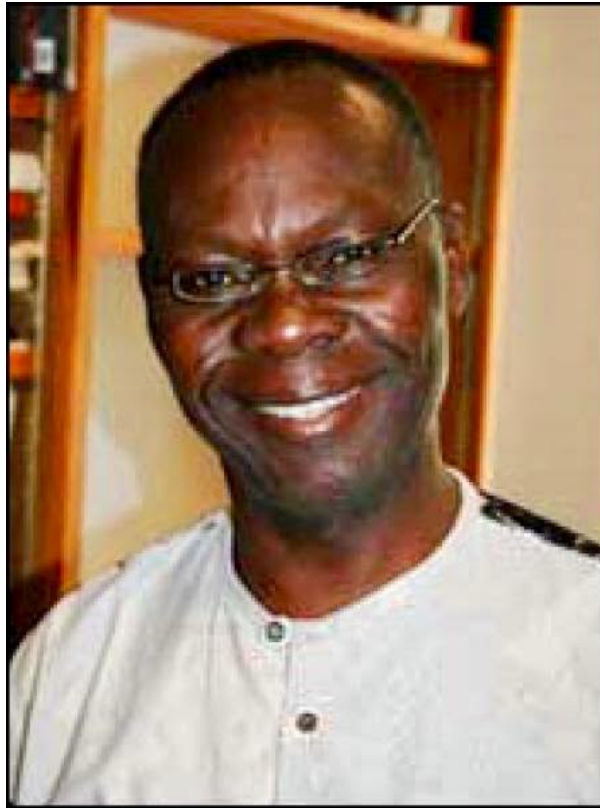


In Memoriam: Professor F. Nii Yartey (1946-2015)



A Life in Perpetual Motion

by

Reginald Yates

Reginald Yates is an internationally recognized dancer, choreographer, educator and cultural historian. He has held over fifty distinguished residencies and appointments throughout the world including the noted institutions of Alvin Ailey, the Juilliard School, the New World School for the Arts, Barnard College, New York University, Lincoln Center, Hunter College, the University of the Arts, Jacob's Pillow, the Sarasota Ballet, the Academy of Arts Cairo Egypt, the National Theater of Ghana, Noyam African Dance Institute, the University of Ghana, the National School of Dance Jamaica W.I. and with legendary artist, activist and anthropologist Katherine Dunham among others. As a Senior Fulbright Scholar, Guggenheim Fellow and Cultural Advisor to the U.S. Embassy in Ghana, he worked extensively with Professor Nii Yartey as an advisor, collaborator, consultant, and as a friend and brother for over fifteen years.

And we the people accept the dancer's role as the center of our lives--in subtle flexion of hands and fingers, our prayers; in his thrusting arms--our thanksgiving; in his stamp and pause; our indignation; in his leap and turns--our defiance; in his bow--our allegiance, his halting Steps--our reverence. Thus he dances, not alone, but with us and we with him. We are not spectators but co-creators and participant in the dramas of the African way of life

Albert Mawere Opoku

The Echo of Loss the Power of Memory Praise Song for the Fallen

Esteemed Dancer, Choreographer, Director, Professor, Scholar, Griot, Mentor, Father, Friend; Gift to all of humanity, F. Nii Yartey passed this life doing what he loved; What he was Called to do. Dance. Like his predecessors , in particular the late Emeritus Professor Albert Mawere Opoku, he was the living embodiment of African culture housed in a vessel that was called to communicate the indelible and enduring legacy of the ancestors through the landscape of the human spirit. As a gatekeeper and repository of Ghanaian dance and music traditions, he understood the power of African movement as a historical foundation and 'living library' for cultural identity, healing, affirmation, empowerment, and as a liaison to the spiritual world. Without fanfare or aplomb, he accepted the mantle and calling upon his life, understanding that the road would not be easy but would yield everlasting and transformational results and rewards.

Artists are the Gatekeepers of Truth. We are Civilization's Radical Voice
Paul Robeson

Obi Nnim Obrempon Nobody knows the Beginning of a Great Man
Akan Proverb

He was born during a period of radical transition, political unrest, cultural reconstruction and reinvention. It was a turbulent atmosphere of anti-colonial riots and African solidarity in a quest for independence from British oppression and colonial rule. He would witness the inception of burgeoning political parties, the manifestation of an independent Ghana in 1957 and the rise of a charismatic, progressive leader, President Kwame Nkrumah in 1960. A cultural revolution would ensue, creating a reservoir of creative geniuses such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Efua Sutherland, Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo, Dr Ephraim Amu, Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia, Albert Mawere Opoku and Kofi Anyidoho among others.

He also witnessed the phenomenon of Highlife music and a resurgence of folk traditions producing some of the most prodigious artists of the time namely E.T Mensah and the Tempos, Kofi Ghanaba, (also known as Guy Warren) , Ebo Taylor, King Bruce, Koo Nimo, Wulomei and the London based band Osibisa. It was a time of cultural revolution and the creation of physical spaces for the preservation and serious study of Ghanaian music and dance (initiated by Nkrumah's vision), that the country would see the emergence of a Ghana Council of the Arts, the Ghana Dance Ensemble and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana Legon. This unprecedented investment would eventually produce certificates and diplomas in the arts and eventually degrees. It would also generate a plethora of leading dance artists such as Emmanuel Ampofo Duodu, Patience Kwakwa, Dr. W. Ofotsu Adinku , Seth Asare Newman and today's younger artists Oh! Nii Kwei Sowah and Ben Ayettey. Many would achieve international prominence and ignite an African consciousness and interest in Ghana as one of the most dynamic cultural centers in the world. As one who immersed himself in the wealth of Africa's cultural milieu, Nii Yartey inherited all of the attributes that would make for greatness; infinite curiosity, defiant courage, unflinching passion, worldly intelligence, an unshakable belief system and a discerning vision. This would only be the beginning of an illustrious artistic and academic career catapulting him in an arena to be hailed as the leading choreographer in Ghana and one of the foremost interpreters and pioneers of contemporary dance in Africa and the world. As one who bridged the gap between tradition and the evolving Africa choreographically, he single handedly pioneered a new trajectory, propelling dance into modernity with respect to Ghanaian tradition and values. As a leader he was not before his time, he was with his time. The nation demanded it. The culture proclaimed it.

The Truest Expression of a People is in its Dance and Music- Bodies Never Lie
Agnes de Mille

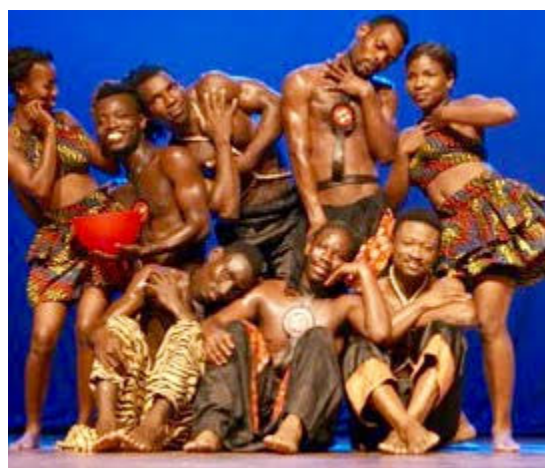
Our first meeting was born of prophecy and divine appointment through Professor Opoku. "You must work with Nii Yartey! You must befriend Nii Yartey!" He declared. His voice was like an Asante Ntamera trumpet in my ear that would change my life forever. Professor Opoku and I shared a common bond, being that we both had prolific experiences through the Juilliard School, Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus and his tutelage under legendary artists Agnes de Mille, Martha Graham and the first Director of Dance at Juilliard, Martha Hill.

Subsequently, He became a cultural informant, protégé, and assistant to Ms. de Mille. A masterful and brilliant artist, he eventually was appointed Technical Consultant for the short lived African themed Broadway musical "Kwamina" choreographed by Ms. de Mille in 1961, starring legendary actors Brock Peters, Terry Carter, Sally Ann Howes and Robert Guillaume. It also included a coterie of preeminent dancers and choreographers such as the sui generis virtuoso Louis Johnson, Charles Moore, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer, Pepsi Bethel, Dr. Glory Van Scott, Camille Yarborough, Joan Peters, Hope Clarke, Lucinda Ransom and Minnie Marshall.

Although he was a great admirer of the innovative artistry of Graham, his purpose for being under her tutelage was not to master her technique but to understand and apply the rudiments of theatre production and theatrical presentation to Ghanaian ceremonial dance traditions. As the first Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble in 1962, (co-founded with Professor Nketia), he completely revolutionized dance in Ghana, totally restructuring the traditional village configuration of the 'circle' to a proscenium format so that all components of stage presentation and choreography could be viewed without obstruction.

This also meant that traditional ceremonies that could last for an inordinate amount of time could be presented in a condensed version without compromising the original intent. Professor Opoku effectively pioneered a platform to create new dance forms that spoke to a country and people in transition politically and culturally. He is credited for creating the term "Dance Dramas" clearly establishing a new genre of dance composition defined within the context of neo-traditional African dance. Out of this new methodology birthed his most famous production "African Liberation Suite", presented in 1965. This would set a precedent and model that many choreographers utilize in Ghana to this day. Nii Yartey would certainly master this method, creating over 30 "Dance Dramas" and choreographies in his lifetime, many of which have been presented throughout the world.

Without a Vision the People Perish
Proverbs 29:18



Our artistic union and friendship was like the collision of two worlds. He entered my life unceremoniously and without formality, except to say "Akwaaba ! I am Nii....Welcome Home My Brother!" Each day in his presence was to feast from a communal bowl of generosity and kindness, a traditional Ghanaian gesture of grace, honor and respect. As a researcher and professional artist, my charge and mission was to consult, document and assist in the development of a codified technique that could be utilized to train African artists without the incorporation of American or European dance training methods. Philosophically and technically he was greatly inspired by Alvin Ailey

and knew several African American dancers and choreographers who were incorporating African Diaspora movement and themes in their work; however, he was resolute and steadfast in his vision to create solely from the foundational genius of his Ghanaian ancestry. (Photo: Noyam African Dance Institute performing Professor Nii Yartey's seminal choreography 'Fire of Koom').

He first witnessed the Ailey Company in 1967 at the Centre for National Culture in Accra. He felt a special kinship with Ailey's work and the moving and inspiring ballets he created, in particular 'Revelations', the signature masterpiece of the company. It was during this performance that he experienced the magnificent artistry of Judith Jamison, who was Mr. Ailey's muse and would eventually become an international dance star in her own right. She would succeed him after his unfortunate demise as the Artistic Director of the company in 1989. In 2002, my affiliation with the Ailey organization allowed for Ms. Jamison to return to Ghana through the American Embassy and be honored as the first American dancer to be enstooled as a Queen Mother in Ghana under the Ga name of Naa Aquayehe Shika.



Judith Jamison, Artistic Director Emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancing with Professor F. Nii Yartey, then Acting Artistic Director of the National Dance Company of Ghana during her enstoolment ceremony. They are joined by Veronica Numo also of the National Dance Company of Ghana.

Nii Yartey had a profound respect for artists who embraced a 'Sankofa' approach to artistry of symbolically 'looking back to move forward', however as a visionary he was clear that he needed to maintain a distinct Ghanaian identity and training method that would provide African artists opportunities, educationally and artistically, to compete in the world. The answer to this was the creation of Noyam in 1998. In the Ga-Dangbe language Noyam means to "Move Forward." It comprised not only of a professional performing company but a dance education institute and choreo lab to investigate new ways of moving that reflected the ever changing social, political, and cultural views of the nation. The company would be the 'living memory' and 'cultural barometer' of the past, present and future; and continues today as the leading contemporary company in Ghana and the major repository for Nii Yartey's choreography. As his mentor Professor Opoku believed that 'Culture is not static', "It must Change as the People Change." Nii Yartey also embraced this philosophy and way of approaching his craft as a personal mantra until the moment of his untimely passing.

When a Griot Dies It is as though a Library has Burned Down
Amadou Hampate Ba

It's usually not until someone dies that we begin to fully examine the scope and depth of their life and contributions. Ancestral truisms avow that one is more powerful in death than in life. As a dancer, intuitively one understands that time is not necessarily on one's side. As the body (the instrument) ages, so is one's sensitivity to the impositions of physical limitations. Like most dance artists, Nii Yartey always had a sense of urgency, perhaps spiritually understanding that his time on earth was expiring and drawing near. As a director and choreographer he was a meticulous taskmaster, extracting perfection from the most complicated and intricate dance steps and gestures. He understood movement as language and its significance in the pantheon of preservation and historical legacies. One wrong port de bras or thrust of the leg could potentially change the course of history and significant events forever.

We Face neither East nor West; We Face Forward.
Kwame Nkrumah

He had a formal African and American education having achieved notable academic credentials by obtaining a dance certificate and diploma in 1971 from the University of Ghana Legon and furthering his education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, earning a Master of Arts degree in Dance in 1975. Even though he received the highest artistic honors and awards in Ghana, and deemed a "National Treasure", Nii Yartey never rested on his laurels. He understood foremost that "The artist never arrives." His *raison d'être* was the 'Work and the Work alone'. As a progressive visionary he was a relentless proponent of cultural exchange and collaborations to promote artistic and intellectual growth, not only for the artists that he served, but for the cultural proliferation of the nation. Significant collaborators included legendary dancer and choreographer Germaine Acogny of Senegal, H. Patten (England), Monty Thompson (Virgin Islands) C.K. Ladzapo (U.S.) and prominent scholar and creator of the Greenotation system, Doris Green (U.S.) to name a few.

As he left this world he was a distinguished Associate Professor at the University of Ghana Legon and Dance Chair. He continued an international career as an Artist and Professor in Residence at numerous institutions while still directing, choreographing, publishing and advising countless developing and professional artists.

This in no way is a complete overview of his enormous contributions to the world, for it's evident that his life and work will be examined and lauded for many years to come. In hindsight, what is most important about Nii Yartey is that he approached the world with African sensibilities, never compromising his culture, identity or humanity. He never sought to be colonized. He sought to analyze, dissect, understand and exalt the world and culture he was born into, with all of its possibilities. He was proud of his Africaness as he was proud to be Ghanaian and Ga. He understood innately the power of the 'breath' before he studied the traditions and technique of modern dance masters in America and Europe. He ultimately knew that the foundation of the 'contraction and release' was in Africa before it was discovered in the "New World"; for he was cognizant, spiritually and physically that the center of the body, the solar plexus, was the birthplace of the life-force. This was evident in the graceful and symbolic gestures of the Ashanti performing 'Adowa' to the life affirming contractions of the Ewe dancing 'Agbadza'

Overall, his absence leaves an unfathomable void in Africa and in the scholarly and artistic world community. He was a bright and shining light, given to us for only a moment, however his powerful and joyful spirit remains with all of whom he deeply touched (personally and professionally), the companies and artists that he carefully nurtured, educated, guided and directed; Most notably The Ghana Dance Ensemble, the National Dance Company of Ghana at the National Theater, and the Noyam African Dance Institute. His spirit permeates the dance halls and the sacred dancing grounds of Dodowa (the home of Noyam), in Europe, America and India where he took his final bow. His humanity and compassion will continue to flow abundantly and gracefully, more than the life giving virtues of the Volta River. He remains indelibly in the minds and hearts of all who loved him, lionized him, and appreciated his sacrifices and contributions.

As a sacred charge, we who are descendants of Professor Nii Yartey's great and enduring legacy must not only remember him and those who have gone before us, but must also incessantly call them by name in the oral tradition of the African Griots and Djelis, so that their contributions to humanity will not be forgotten. We must continue to create a continuum of memory through new songs, praise chants, dances, poems and publications; so that their work will not be rendered in vain. 'Lest we forget', "No one Lives or Dies unto Himself or Herself."

"Someone is Responsible for Our Very Existence."

"And We Are All the Better Because He Existed. We Are All the Better Because He Lived. "

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

---Maya Angelou

(Excerpt, "When Great Trees Fall" 2006)

YAAA WOOOO AJOGBA! Sleep Well.....My Brother My Friend

REST IN PEACE, POWER AND PARADISE