The Impact of Colonisation on the Ability to Make a Meaning of ‘Black’ South African Contemporary Dance in the 21st Century

by

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Abstract

This paper will explore two examples of African contemporary dance, including the 2014 Uhambo 1 production in Athlone Cape Town and Four Seasons, choreographed by Gregory Maqoma and performed by the Vuyani Dance Theatre at Artscape Theatre Cape Town in 2014. Hence, it also argues that one critical way of supporting audiences to resist past and present forms of oppression is for the creation of meaning (value) through interdisciplinary choreography and post-performance discussions with audience members which will allow Black South Africans to begin to reclaim their ability to reflect on the meaning of contemporary African dance forms, and in turn, to reflect and act upon confidently, through their own identity.

Keywords: Black, African Contemporary Dance, Apartheid, Colonisation and Politics

Introduction

Most audience members find difficulty drawing meaning from the African contemporary interpretations of African Black dance. The beauty in dance can be found in the fluidity and ambiguity of the art form. It can be a form of self expression, a vessel to send a message, a way of retelling and reliving history, a ritual for worship, a form of celebration, and anything else that it wants to be or be interpreted as. Black dance[1] can take the shape of many meanings and intentions, but the social, cultural, economic, and political environment of its context cannot be ignored. The African traditional Black dance can also be broken up into subcategories such as sacred dances, which include traditional religious dances, cult and ritual dances, and ceremonial dances, which include sectarian and communal dances (Bengho, 2000). The political and historical environment surrounding Black[2] people’s dance in South Africa has significantly impacted its expression and evolution throughout time. According to Anca Girchescu:

> […] even if dance can be artificially separated from its social context, and considered solely in its physical features as an independent artistic means of expression, the social components are implicit to the dancing person as an individual and as a member of a socio-cultural community (2001. p.1).

Considering this, Sylvia Glasser, founder of Moving into Dance (MID) maintains that in dance there are two opposing beliefs. One belief is that dance is political; whereas the contrary opinion is that dance occupies a separated domain and is not connected to political matters (1991: 112). These same opposites apply to many other areas of life and expressions of creativity, with some arguing that there is no such thing as an apolitical action while others insist that politics have nothing to do with it.

This paper will argue that dance is always political. It suggests that socio-political components are forever evident in dance. Furthermore, it will define Black dance and use South Africa's apartheid years to identify specific case studies where dance was a political statement. After apartheid most people assumed that South African dance was no longer a medium for overall societal change yet this paper will argue that dance takes on a political aesthetic[3] no matter what the context. Taking matters a step further, most Black South Africans have been wrestling with the notion of African contemporary dance.

This paper will propose that many Black South Africans are not ready for African contemporary dance because of lasting implications of colonial educational structures that allow them to watch and internalise an art form that expresses their cultural heritage without a full grasp and clear understanding. Colonialism and Bantu defined education damaged the society by indoctrination and abuse of psychological behaviours. Craig Soudien suggests that because of colonial humiliation, violence, and domination of South Africans, many still suffer from a dependence that "persist[s] into the modern South Africa as masters find ways of keeping their subjects from reflection and self-reflection" (2012:100). The [in] ability to reflect and self-reflect makes it challenging for most Black South Africans to understand and accept modern interpretations of tradition. I am aware that this applies equally to white South Africans when it comes to ballet, as some do not have the capacity to engage with the choreographic and directorship of the work in a depth context. Fortunately both dance disciplines differ with respect to historical background in politics, theatre and from socio-traditional to theatre spectacle concerns and issues of commonalities. Finally, I will hypothesise when and how South Africa will become ready to critically engage with African contemporary dance. There are two sides to the challenge; the choreographic language that is complexed and minimal understanding of the audience.

Defining of "Black Dance" within the South African Context

The concept of Black dance continues to be debated in the scholarly, artistic, and societal arenas. This paper utilises the positive form of the term but first will display the various sides of this on-going debate.

As a young Black dance academic I experienced the negativity behind the term Black. The word was associated with discrimination and being viewed as unintelligent and underprivileged. For some reason this term has been used endlessly in times of apartheid by Black people for empowerment and politically rebellious reasons. Out of such stigma, Black people reappropriated the word and inserted value by attempting to use it in a positive voice, which reflected intelligence, pride, culture and ownership. In this paper I will expose the negative and positive construct, focusing more on the latter. The ideology of Black has roots of consciousness intact due to its history and legacy.

This ideology had a long history, which dates back to the 1880s, when it was borrowed by foreign writers such as Frantz Fanon. The very term Black came from the United States of America and referred to people previously known as Africans, Indians, or Coloureds. Hayes explains, "Black Americans offered the idea of non-white unity against their oppressors. However, the phrase non-white defined Blacks in negative terms" (2000: 179).

Ideas about Black unity and emancipation are deeply rooted in the struggle Steve Biko and others launched against apartheid since the 1960s. It should be emphasized that in South Africa, both the rhetoric and philosophy of Black Consciousness contradicted the fundamental principles of grand apartheid. My usage of the term Black correlates with Black Consciousness[4] or Afrocentricity[5] theories that were designed to "infuse the Black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life" (Biko, 1971: 68). In addition, Mazama explains the importance of Afrocentricity that "[…] rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious consciousness back" (2001:388). This explains the sensitivity behind the complex term "Black" that it is used from Africa to the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe. The term Black dance came from the Americas as well; Zita Allen points out that "there was a tendency to romanticize Black dance as debonair, delightful, daring and erotic while also stereotyping it as cheap, political, angry, simplistic, loaded with literal gesture and trite narratives" (Allen, 2001: 3).

Changing the compass and directing such notion to South Africa, there are some parallels or commonalities to the American experiences with regard to Black dance. In South Africa, traditional Black dance is part of a form of communication that allows individuals or groups to express feelings and beliefs and to preserve history and cultural traditions (Rani, 2008:124). It is also a form of expression that is often passed down from generation to generation for religious, social or ceremonial purpose (Snipe, 1996:68).

Within the South African context "Black" dance refers to dance originating from indigenous African Black populations. However, the term "Black dance" has been used pejoratively as a label in the field of dance criticism and aesthetics (Craighead, 2006:19). For instance, is Black dance the advent of Black dancers performing on stage? Or is it dance work choreographed by Black individuals? Could it constitute work, which emerges from Black or African choreographers or producers? Must Black dance always have a theme relating to the experience of "Black" people? (Allen, 2001:2; Craighead, 2006:19). Can non-Black dancers perform "Black" dance? These questions are important to consider when attempting to understand the dance scene in South Africa and across the African continent. The definition of "Black" itself, as a race, is a politicised socio-political construction.

While Black dance as a category of identification promotes work produced and performed by artists of colour, it also "promotes a racist legacy which supports the dominant hegemonic discourse(s) operating within contemporary (global) society through the process of setting up an oppositional discourse of the "other" (Craighead, 2006: 20). The category of expression as "Black" automatically separates it from the dominant culture and politicises work made by Black people. This label implies that it exists within the racist superstructures of White Dance. Clare Craighead and Lliane Loots comment on the Black/ white dance dichotomy in South Africa, but this may be an academic construction, not a term made popular in Black dance circles. As Black dance is used in various fields, it indicates a cultural difference that includes politics of difference with underlying ideological power struggles and a promotion of white superiority that places the over simplistic and singular label of "Black" on an extremely diverse category of movements, cultures and traditions (Craighead, 2006:20). In my opinion that is the romanticised version of Black dance because it can marginalise the artistic freedom of the dancers.

In the Black Dance/ White Dance dichotomy is the "notion of a cultural divide within which rests the highly constructed notions of high art and popular or low art" (Craighead, 2006: 20). This dichotomy between the perceptions of dance from Europe and Africa is also seen when South African contemporary artists, dancers and choreographers use their training in Europe as a value leverage to acquire better artistic jobs by playing off the expectation that European training is more prestigious than training with a South African dance company (Loots, 2006: 98). The arrogance displayed by those in the dominant white culture also shows a level of ignorance about the cultural, artistic and rhythmic diversity and complexity of African dances (Glasser, 1993: 83). Western superiority has narrowly defined the wide range of African dances, thus oppressing the dance form and people associated with it. In contrast to the above-mentioned ways of conceptualising "Black dance", I will use the term to mean a hybrid form of movement that tells the present stories of our people in modern times.

Conflicting Aesthetics

Sharon Friedman declares, "the arts in South Africa have emerged from, and been shaped by, a history of colonialism and apartheid. Both the colonial and apartheid regimes devalued indigenous African culture reducing it at best to ethnic curiosity" (2010: 1). Most dances after the colonial incursion into South Africa have thus become a political struggle. The Black/ White dichotomy that was created because of oppressive overtones associated with the injection of European dance, for example ballet, also generated a distinction between "high" culture and "low" culture. "The suppression, prohibition and regulation of indigenous dances under colonial rule are an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable political and moral anxiety" (Reed, 1998: 506). Thus, our indigenous dance is important because it gave birth to social traditional dance, and consequently, into a transformation that has created a migration and movement domestication in South Africa that have evolved and can be reinterpreted.

Because of colonial suppression, "Black dance" became subjected to less hedonistic ways of expression. According to Gottschild, even the structural aesthetic of ballet, the straight spine, connects the structural principal of the past colonial worldview. "Europe positioned itself in the center of the world with everything else controlled and defined by it" (1996: 56). But, given the Gottschild quote one must understand that ballet has evolved since 1996 even in South Africa. Ballet goes on to contrast the European dance aesthetics with African Black dance, where most African Black dances share a democratic equality of all body parts in polyrhythmic manner. "The European dancing body is rigid, aloof, cold, and one dimensional. By European standards, the Africanist dancing body is vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and most of all, promiscuous" (ibid). These accounts tell us that within the South African dance context, there was a clear separation of what kind of dance was appropriate for "civilised" society. Dance in Black South African contemporary society has been political since the European occupation.

Dance as Political versus Apolitical in South Africa

The Oxford dictionary defines "political" as "of or relating to the public affairs of a country". Considering this definition and the history of South Africa's dance, the simple answer is "yes". African Black dance will always be a political statement either as a struggle between traditional cultural forms and modern, urbanised culture or as resistance to past oppression. Dance can speak to the dissatisfaction of Black people about racial elitism that continues to drive systematic socioeconomic exclusion from health and educational service. The act of performing African Black dance in any area – a stage, a classroom or the street – is a testament to the survival of culture and direct defiance of the South African apartheid government. The "political" can also transcend the internal affairs of a nation, as "Black dance" takes on political meaning all over the world.

"When independence came, Africans revitalised some traditional dances and formed dance companies…whose members could be used to increase national identity while serving as ambassadors" (Snipe, 2007: 71). This example shows an emerging pride in "Black dance" as something to be shared within and outside of South Africa and never repressed. Even though there are countries that have bans on dance, the dance community still performs, unconcerned with negative perception. Because "Black" dance is political, there are innate powers that dance holds. It has the ability to transfix an audience, which can allow them to identify with the choreographer's message or create meaning for themselves. These powers are what South African choreographers must use to move forward while honouring tradition.

Black dance was used originally as a political tool for the empowerment of artists of colour, but it has now become an oppressive, racialised identification nametag (Craighead, 2006: 19). However, those who have political power and represent the dominant culture tend to believe that dance is not political and that those who do not have power think that it is. One possible explanation for this difference is that the dominant group does not need dance as a form of expression to gain political power and can conveniently see it as a form of entertainment. Conversely, dance can be a medium to allow those without political power to make political statements in a more ambiguous form than through, for example, speech or picketing. Dance and music can often provide a voice for those who are denied verbal or literary expression of opposition and resistance (Glasser, 1991: 120). A cultural expression as a form of social commentary is also a way for dance to be political. For example, Gregory Maqoma's *Ketima* (2003) portrayed stages of life and processes of socialization through explicit and symbolic intimate movements by male dancers, which left audiences tense and uneasy (Kodesh, 2006: 53).

As South African history moved forward into the apartheid years, "Black dance" became increasingly integral to protesting the pro-apartheid government. For instance, the Gumboot dance, performed by South African migrant mine workers when prohibited from drumming or speaking to one another, was created as "a testament of the struggle these men face on a daily basis under the exploitation apartheid policy" (Snipe, 2000: 9). These types of dances including Toyi-Toyi were ways of directly incorporating dance, which was part of the lifeblood in traditional South African life into the anti-apartheid movement.

> "A Toyi-toyi is a dance that expresses defiance and protest, it is also important to note that it is usually a non-violent expression of protest. It could begin as the stomping of feet and spontaneous chanting during protest that could include political slogans or songs, either improvised or previously created" (Collins Dictionary, 2014).

These two dances are mere examples of how dance was used as political defiance. In South Africa during the 1960s, under the separate Amenities Act, there existed racially exclusive Performance Arts Councils. Because of this set up there were racially exclusive ballet companies, which only perpetuated the racial separation in the arts (Glasser, 1991: 114). The only funding for the arts under the apartheid system was for ballet and was not at all concerned with the traditional "Black dances" or the development of "Black art". Ballet was the only dance form that was allowed on stage, while traditional African Black dance was relegated to traditional practices and religious ceremonies. This perpetuated a system of creating a politically "correct" dance form and a protest dance form at an institutional level.

The Demise of Apartheid

Not only within South Africa was "Black dance" used to fight the apartheid government and showcase resistance. *Amandla*, the international performing arts group during the 1970's, showcased Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, Shangaan and Sotho dances to "emphasize that these dances were deliberately intended to assert the value of indigenous South African cultures as a part of a larger, shared conception of national identity and to refuse apartheid's distorted notions of ethnic particularity and separate development" (Gilbert, 2007: 434). Members of *Amandla* and other performers understood the importance of using dance as a force to inform the world of the oppression in South Africa. *Sarafina*, the dance and music production produced and directed by Mbongeni Ngema, also played an important role in telling the stories of the weak education system and corrupt police that were helping the apartheid government eradicate possible threats to their power. These forms of protest, the Toyi-toyi traditional "Black" African dances and even dancing during protest songs were all physical manifestations of resistance against the white Afrikaner strangle hold on South Africa. From a distance, dance is only body movement. To most Black people of South Africa, dance was their freedom. Even the power of the state could not strip the meaning of song and music. The protesters identified the political strength of African "Black dance" and used it as a tool of nonviolence against political oppression. The inclusive nature of African dance allowed protesters of all races to move to a single rhythm. That rhythm was one of freedom and equality.

Old Questions - New Questions

After the apartheid government crumbled, African Black dance faced a new problem. How was Black dance going to engage with the new accepting society? How does African Black dance begin to enter the new age and space of freedom of expression after being repressed for centuries? Can Black dance begin to evolve or must it maintain its traditional codification?

Twenty four years after the dismantling of the apartheid government, these questions have taken new forms: since traditional African Black dance played such a major role in bringing awareness to the human rights violations of the apartheid government, how does African Black dance move forward as an art form? Should it maintain its roots as a traditional art form or can it begin to evolve into something else? Just because African Black dance was used as a political tool to remove the apartheid government, must it remain as political art form, or can it morph into being apolitical?

One answer is that artists should focus on creating a new wave of African contemporary dances seen in works by choreographers like Gregory Maqoma, David April, Sifiso Kweyama, Sylvia Glasser, Sibonakalisa Ndaba, Mamela Nyamza, Thabo Rapoo, Luyanda Sidiya and Sonia Radebe to name a few. However, choreographers face several challenges in guiding most African Black audiences to accept, understand and receive African contemporary dance as a medium of expression. Firstly, most local South Africans demand traditional dance to remain traditional yet be produced at a speed that matches globalisation. Secondly, most tourists in South Africa also demand traditional dances, but more for the sake of experiencing what they believe to be an authentic "national identity". The "authentic" for them lies in the appearance of tradition, regardless of whether it is representational of the present or the actual history. Thus, upholding an image of the traditional is somewhat profitable, yet highly inauthentic. Thirdly, in reality, there are few traditional Black dances practised and performed in neighborhoods populated by Black South Africans especially in the urban areas. Most Black people including the "born free" generations are interested in modern interpretation of Black dance because of its status within the "state of the cool". Fourthly, audiences tend not to put effort into interpreting contemporary adaptation of traditional dances because they have limited artistic literacy, or ability to understand the language of the artistic medium. Finally, African Black contemporary dance is challenged because choreographers have to create works that are accepted and understood by various different audiences. Generation gap needs to be understood and be embraced in order for the discipline to prosper and flourish.

Modernisation in South African Black Dance

Modernity, urbanisation and industrialisation have had mixed effects, leading to both the birth of and destruction of traditions in African Black dance. With the modernity and industrialisation that came with the discovery of gold in Witwatersrand and diamonds in Kimberly, a very large number of Black South Africans migrated from rural areas to the cities to work in the mines. This brought together people from Xhosa, Zulu, Venda and Tswana to name a few of the ethnic backgrounds and each had distinct rituals, traditions and beliefs; in an attempt to form a new unity, however, came a loss of tradition and diversity (Rani, 2008: 125). The effects of urbanisation can be seen through the cultural forms of expression of these groups.

During urbanisation, the racial legislation meant that it was often illegal for Black residents to live in the cities and thus the music and dance produced by this urban Black population were also often a form of "political resistance to a hostile system" (Glasser, 1993: 81). Because the mining community mostly employed male workers, the movements of gumboots dance, which evolved from the mines, were influenced by these demographics and social elements in townships. Traditional South African dances had defined roles for different members in society and for gender and age categories, and they also had certain meanings in different socio-cultural contexts and events (Rani, 2008: 126). With industrialisation, Black South Africans began performing these traditional dances in urban environments and on stages, which stripped away the context and thus the original, traditional meaning of the dance in specific community areas and at cultural and ritual events. When traditional dance is moved onto the stage, it is not freely accessible to everyone and it becomes an elitist commodity, which goes against the participatory and inclusive character of the dance (Rani, 2008: 126).

As an example, in September 2014, at the Baxter Dance Theatre Festival a performance was presented by the *Tswana dance group*. This same dance group can be found behind the Golden Acre Shopping Mall in Cape Town streets during which performers ask for money from tourists. At the Baxter Theatre, professional adult dancers performed this dance for a majority white audience that paid to see the performance. How did a dance so traditionally and culturally embedded became popularised and publicised in this way? When a dance is performed out of its original context, it takes value away from the culture and tradition of those people. Although culture and tradition are not a stagnant process, the commoditisation of a traditional art form reduces it to entertainment – a far cry from its respected place in South African history as a means of resistance and survival. This example of the *Tswana* dance performance can be contrasted with the performance of *Zulu isiShameni* in an *Indlamu* style at the Langa Township. While the Zulu performers are dancing, the audience is asked to clap and chant with them to add percussive musicality and be part of the show. A key characteristic of traditional dance is that "participant and observer are one and the same with a fluid and interactive relationship" (Rani, 2008: 129). The dance and musicality of the clapping are communal and cooperative aspects of the dance that an audience would not feel if they were simply watching the dance from their seat in a theatre. Western influences have caused the evolution of some African Black dances, led to socio-political movements in dance, and blended and sometimes overlooked the traditional context of music and dance rooted in resistance.

Case Study – General Unreceptiveness

To support the finding that most South African communities are not prepared for modern interpretations of Black dance, or African Contemporary dance, I will cite two performances that took place 4 years ago in various performance spaces. The first is *Uhambo 1*, a dance production arranged and directed by Mzo Gasa, for which I choreographed some work and assisted back stage. The performance took place in the Athlone area at the Joseph Stone Theatre in 2014 and incorporated most dance schools, studios and tertiary institutions that focus on dance. The performance comprised two performances, with acts presented by different dance institutions such as the University of Cape Towns' School of Dance, Chris Hani Secondary High School, Indoni Dance Academy, Arts and Leadership Academy and Jazzart Theatre's training program, to name a few.

The Jazzart Theatre trainees performed a long acrobatic performance, which wowed the audience with skill and endurance, choreographed by Mziyanda Mancam. Toward the end of the performance, one of the dancers came down stage right, prop side. The rest of the up stage left space was left in the dark as the spot light ignited stage right. The music softened and the one dancer was left alone. He clutched his stomach and groped overhead with splayed fingers. The movement vocabulary was so strikingly different and far more emotive than the rest of the piece. It was clear that this segment was no longer "African dance". The movement was so striking for the amount of feeling that came through that I was instantly enticed into this moment. Yet, I was alone in my own world hypnotised by such awe and artistic aesthetic pleasure. The rest of the audience laughed at the performer. Perhaps the audience wrote it off as foreign or even a bastardisation of traditional movement or perhaps as non-Afrocentric in its expression. The moment was unexpected, but not at all deserving of laughter as a response. Humour and laughter are a form of coping – when people are uncomfortable; some make a joke, other try to "laugh it off". This reaction verified Soudien's notion of South Africa's modern problem of lacking reflection and self-reflection. If an audience member cannot reflect on past experience and in turn use those experiences to empathise with moment, how can one begin to find the performance meaningful or even enjoyable. If people are still searching for the pieces of their own identity, how can they begin to palate seeing their traditional dance altered for alternative meanings? Since that moment was far from typical African dance, it is possible that the audience felt cheated. That seeing "Black" dance used for anything else than its "pure" African form is unacceptable.

The second example occurred when watching Gregory Maqoma's *Four Seasons* at Arts Cape Theatre in 2016. Although the piece does not have explicit African, or political, themes, African dance styles and influences could be seen in the contemporary choreography. Though this dance would not be considered a traditional African dance, some of the scenes, styles and seasons displayed specific cultural contexts.

For example, in the summer scene, the dancers showed off their movements in solos while the other dancers cheered around them. This was characteristic of traditional Black African dance as communal and participatory. The material was accessible especially if you watch the South African nightclub scene, a street-smart attitude approach, the walks; panache and movement style, which may be observed in our present Township dance vocabulary, was present in that season.

In the "winter" season of the show, there was despair, anger, loneliness, and fear, with movements indicating gunshots. The dance was not publicised as a political piece and most of the choreography was not overtly political, but the fact that Maqoma included the more explicit gunshots gestures hinted to his stance on violence, weapons, urbanisation and the government. It was a clear reflection of the reality that gun violence and criminal acts bombard South Africans in daily life. The show was expressive and interpretive but still highlighted how the production of dance is not exclusive to the context of political, social, cultural and economic environment, meaning it constantly engages with such complexed socio economic challenges rather than closing a blind eye to such. Following the performance, there was a question and answer session offered by the Company. Some were unsure if they identified seasons and the story line correctly. Audience members commented that there was a lot of dancing and that the costume were amazing suggesting that they did not understand the storyline within the seasons and the dance material that was presented. I fully understand that each person can interpret a dance piece according to their own frame of reference, but is that enough, especially when it comes to the choreographer's expectations?

Structuring Meaning

The complications with African contemporary dance, in terms of a developing art form, lie in the ability to make meaning of what is perceived. According to Jack Mezirow (1990), there are two dimensions of meaning: *schemes* and *perspectives.* Meaning schemes are a set of related and habitual if-then relationships, for instance how food satisfies hunger. On the other hand, meaning perspectives are made up of higher order schemata, the structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation.

In the Jazzart presentation at the Joseph Stone, there is an apparent gap in the meaning schemes. For the audience, the moment the dancer ventured from recognizable African movement, the if-then relationship terminated. Because the dance, before the solo performance, was strictly African codified movements, it reinforced the if-then dichotomy. The meaning changed from meaning schemes to meaning perspectives. Since the movement was no longer recognizable, the room for interpretation increased, which leads to a greater amount of reflection and self-reflection in order to understand what this new movement means to the viewer.

Because of the humiliation of colonisation and apartheid, there is a lack of past experiences that would enable interpretation of contemporary dance in South Africa. In the words of Gregory Maqoma, "My purpose is not just to create art for public consumption – as an African contemporary creator, I am creating a domain of reality in which social and emotional conflicts can be brought into the open and made available for public discussion" (2006: 35). Even if this is the attempt of some African contemporary creators, the audience may choose not to participate in the public discussion or even reconcile with the past events that are conjured by the performance. If dance is political, perhaps the South African audience is not ready to talk about the politics concerning African contemporary dance just yet.

How Do We Start the Conversation?

If the South African audience is not ready to participate in the discussion that African contemporary dance conjures, then when will it be time? Soudien concludes, "We need to recognize the long shadow of our country's history as it continues to darken the corners of our minds as we work out who we are and how we relate to one another" (Soudien, 2012. p. 125). I propose that through early exposure to the expressive arts, there can be a connection made that dance can be used as a platform not only for political discourse or traditional purpose. Dance can be a medium for self-expression, identity issues, gender questioning and our collective memory and struggle as humans. Black dance is how we see ourselves in the world and how the world sees us. Yet, these connections are only made and strengthened by exposure. In order to make meaning of African Black contemporary dance, the new South African education system must distance itself from its history of stripping citizens of reflection and self-reflection. Finally African Black contemporary dance asks for these two forms of engagement.

It is possible that the audience at the Joseph Stone left and discussed with others what they saw. However, structured, critical discussion and reflection led by the artists themselves is imperative to find deeper meaning and learning in the art form. Because of the lack of exposure to African Black contemporary dance, having post performance discussions about the dance production would transform moments of uncomfortable laughter to emotional movements and empathy. For most audience members, this forum would be beneficial for discussion, sharing thoughts and aiding in the reflection process. These discussions could create a precedent of dialogue around the dance scene. Since African Black contemporary dance, at its core, addresses the emergence of traditional and modern, there is an equal acknowledgement of the old and the new. Both can coexist in the new South Africa. Through early exposure and critical discussion, South African audience members will begin to see the depth in the fusion of traditional and modern.

Conclusion

People are inevitably influenced by political structures. The knowledge we create and discuss is not without influence from power, which can be translated into dance. Some dance movements and expression are born from socio-political, economic events and systems. Their aim may not be to directly send a political message, but as people and dancers we are part of a political system. As the nation is becoming “normalised” one would expect dance to become de-politicised, but some of the prejudices, norms, and hegemonic notions about “Black” dance still hold. The fusion and incorporation of Black dance with other Eurocentric and contemporary dances can on one side be seen as diluting culture, but on another side is a way to increase cultural awareness and exposure. It can be a means to expose and normalise this form of dance so that it can be seen on the same level of prestige as ballet traditionally has. The sacredness of African indigenous Black dance should still be respected and that needs to come with proper education about the history and culture behind the dance form.

The people of South Africa have historically been deeply disturbed from the traumatic experience of colonisation and the apartheid system. African Black dance became the medium for change and as a result broke the shackles of oppression. The people of South Africa acknowledged the corrupt system and danced their way to freedom. In the new South Africa, there is now a safe space for all stories. Yet, the fractured identities and misplaced peoples make it difficult for artistic growth when South Africans are digging in the past. To make meaning of the new South Africa, dance creators must construct space for insights, reflection and open discussion as compulsory.

It is clear that dance has been and forever will be political because of the very nature of movement; being free from stillness is a form of protest. We are made to move and to make meaning of dance is key to a better understanding of others and ourselves. South Africa has a deep-rooted history in dance; dance as a whole should be encouraged to challenge and wrestle with modernity and permeate the boundaries of European and African Black dance. The energy to create and experiment with dance in South Africa is alive, but the people need to be on board as well. Through exposure, reflection and self-reflection the South African audience will be prepared to take on the abstract in order to make meaning.

Notes:

1. “The term Black dance can be understood as a label used to describe the movement-based, cultural production of persons of African descent throughout the diaspora who are identified as Black within the context of this racial system” (Amin, 2001, p. 8).

2. Black people to refer more broadly to all persons of African descent who are identified racially as Black in both the Americas and the broader global context (Amin, 2011, p. 8).

3. According to Crispin Sartwell…it is a philosophy of art and art history in a new way, clarifying notions of aesthetics – beauty, sublimity and representation – and applying them in a political context (p. 26).

4. A movement of the 1960s after the civil rights movement of the 1950s, involving the cultivation of pride in a cultural identity for Black persons (Dictionery.com).

5. A movement spearheaded by African-American scholars to prove that, despite what most people would like to believe, ancient Africa had her own civilizations, languages, cultures, and history long before the arrival of the first Europeans to the continent (Mazama, 2001, p.388).

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