



Issue 11: Winter 2009

MEET THE ARTIST

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Meet the Artist

Editorial by Jeanette Bain-Burnett

ADAD is committed to supporting professional artists working with dance of the African Diaspora (DAD). It's an exciting and daunting mission but not half as challenging or inspiring as the lives of the artists themselves. In this issue we meet a handful of artists who are on the cutting edge of DAD - creating new, innovative work. We meet Alesandra Seutin, Artistic Director of Vocab Dance, whose Afro-eclectic contemporary dance is making waves in the capital; Upswing Aerial, the only black-led circus company in the UK and James Mweu, experimental contemporary dance artist visiting from Kenya as part of Woking Dance Festival's Dance Dialogues exchange programme. We also get a glimpse into the future with students on Irie! Dance Theatre's new Foundation Degree.

This is going to be an exciting year for ADAD. We will be hosting the first Festival of Dance of the African Diaspora from June 5-7, 2009. The event will feature performances, workshops, talks and more. Watch this space! We look forward to this event becoming a regular highlight of the UK dance calendar. For more details of ADAD events, see the ADAD News page. We are also proud to announce ADAD's new Trailblazers 2008/09 - Lola Adodo, Roni Cheesman Freddie Opoku-Addaie and Karensa Louis. For more about this year's Trailblazers and their projects, [click here](#). So all in all, we're looking forward to a great year. Keep checking the ADAD website to stay up to date with our activities!

Here's wishing you a very happy and fulfilling 2009!

ADAD News and Events

2008 has been a great year for building partnerships and new initiatives. ADAD launched Open Stage™, an informal platform for dance of the African Diaspora, which took place in June and September. We partnered with Feedback 33, a dancer's mentoring forum based at London Studio Centre and Independent Dance, based at Siobhan Davies Studios to host these events. The artists and companies who participated included Tavaziva Dance Company, Iris Debrito and Uchenna Dance Company (Vicki Igbokwe). The professional feedback panels included Thea Barnes, Jacky Guy and Funmi Adewole. We are grateful to all who have attended and made it possible to create a safe space for the artists to present new work and work in progress.

ADAD's photographic exhibition *'Black Dance' in Britain 1930's to 1990's: Moments* also continued to tour in 2008. Moving to Stratford Circus in East London for four months and then to The Drum in Birmingham for a two-month run starting in December 2008. The photographs continue to inspire and educate audiences wherever they are exhibited. One of the highlights of the tour was the *Portrait of a Nation* project in East London. This initiative saw a group of young people coming together to explore their heritage under the title 'This is who we think we are'. The group created a performance incorporating dance, music, and drama and used the photographic exhibition as a talking point about the heritage of black dance artists in Britain.

Upcoming Events in 2009

Tuesday February 17 th	Open Stage @ Iriel Dance Theatre
Thursday February 19 th	Dance Under Construction @ the Drum
Thursday March 12 th	Studio to Stage @ Swindon Dance
Thursday March 19 th	Dance Under Construction @ the Drum
Thursday April 23 rd	Open Stage @ East London Dance
Friday June 5 th -7 th	Festival of Dance of the African Diaspora @ London's Southbank Centre

For further information about events, please check the ADAD Events page at www.adad.org.uk

Vocab Dance

Alessandra Seutin, Artistic Director of Vocab Dance, talks to Ithalia Forel about how her company's unique dance vocabulary is evolving.



Your company Vocab Dance, was established in 2006. What is the company's aim?

The aim of Vocab Dance is to bridge the gap between Contemporary dance and Afro inspired dances. I work on a contemporary base but, because my background is in Jazz, Street and African Dance, I fuse these forms with Contemporary dance in order to create new vocabulary. It then becomes my personal style of Contemporary dance, a fusion of many influences.

Who makes up Vocab Dance?

I am Vocab Dance in a way. I am the choreographer and the director. My dancers are elements of it as well, they are part of it, they inspire me as much as other things.

How many dancers are in your company at the moment?

I have six core female dancers, but I also have four part time male dancers who come in when they are needed.

So is it mainly a female company?

Well I work mainly with women, the boys are there but they come in for pieces when they are needed but the core group is female.

So that is an intentional choice?

Yes maybe, because I think women first of all are easier to work with in terms of reliability, and in terms of training I am more excited to work with women in order to make them stronger, because the boys I work with are already really strong. So my aim is to focus on the female dancers and work on their strength, keeping their femininity but to gain that strength that a man has when he is on stage.

Where are you based?

We are based in Hackney, in Carol Straker Dance Foundation. This is where I work and teach dance, so Carol allows me to use studio space for rehearsals.

What is your artistic ethos? What do you want to share via the creation of your pieces?

I share stories, real life stories, and personal stories. I share issues that we deal with in every day life, and that's how I create my dances and the movement. As my movements come from every day life and I use my technique to make them dancey. I mean any movement that I create or make is about life and is about an experience and a feeling.

What are the main influences to your company's style and work?

My background ,everyday life, people's experiences, stories that I have been told and music. I use music that I might not use for a piece but I might use it for inspiration, I may use Hip-hop if I want something hard, or rock. Books, poetry, a lot of poetry because I write spoken word myself, which I have used in my pieces.

Who are your major influences, do you have any favourite poets?

Well I don't have a favourite poet, there are different people and contemporaries that I quite like, Deborah Grey, and a guy called Shabaz, most of them are American. For example the Shabaz has a poem about black males in society, which I used for a male piece. In my work, I don't just focus on black issues but being from a mixed heritage- I am a black woman from Belgium, living in the UK's society - I am inspired by what is happening around me. I think living in London inspires me as well, as things are so different, taking something new in every day.

Going back to dance style influences, what specific techniques have you focused on?

In terms of contemporary I love Graham - the strength, the power, the emotion and the drama of it. That is my favourite technique. It's odd but I think it has got something really genuine and honest about it. In terms of Jazz, I use Jazz for the dynamics - the turns. I have studied Matt Mattox and Lyrical Jazz, so it is more about the dynamics of Jazz that I would use in my contemporary pieces. The musicality of Hip-hop, and the fluidity and articulation of the back from African dance creates my style. Maybe one part of the body will be very clean but the other part will be very loose. For example the upper body may be very loose and natural and very articulated while the feet may be very balletic. There are sections in different pieces where the girls are doing footwork that is very technical and at the same time the upper body is very loose and the face is relaxed with an emphasis on performance, and vice versa.

So from all these different dance influences which do you think is the most prominent in your dance language?

Someone has asked me this question before. I think my heart, and my spirit is of a Hip-hop dancer with the training of a Contemporary dancer, and the body of an African dancer. So I can't really choose. It depends on my inspiration at the time and the theme of the piece. All of these factors are contributory as all of those styles are in me. But I love Contemporary for the openness and the space that it allows me, creating movement that I can't actually classify but at the same time you can recognise without really classifying or pinpointing. So that is why I call it 'contemporary dance' because it is something new, not because of the fact that it is a specific technique. 'contemporary' can be Hip-Hop or African. Technically, what I make is 'contemporary dance theatre', because I mainly focus on theatrical work using 'contemporary' forms.

So tell us more about your personal artistic journey, how did you get to where you are today and are there any significant moments that you can remember that impacted upon this?

A lot of my journey so far has been within the context of my training. That's where I met the people that connected me to where I am today. My training in Belgium helped me a lot, in terms of the grounding, foundation and the dedication. When I came here I thought people did not work hard enough. In Belgium the mentality in which we work is more hardcore than here, so it helped me in terms of dedication and pushing my ideas forward. But here the opportunity of going to college and University helped me get to where I am. At first I started at Laban but I stopped because I had a child, it was really difficult to be in a vocational institution with a child. So I stopped and then spent a year at City and Islington College, before going to Middlesex. A lot of the dancers that are in my company now I met in college when I danced with a Youth Company called Connecting Vibes, which is run by Beverley Glean who is also Artistic Director for Irie! Dance Theatre.

Most of the dancers that I met there are still dancing with me in Vocab. I attended Islington College whilst waiting for UCAS just to keep up with my dance training as I did not want to have a year gap and that is where I met my dancers. I believe everything happens for a reason. Laban was good in terms of technique but I did not really like the idea of the choreography, I felt like they wanted to strip away what I was in a way. Whereas Middlesex really allowed me to be free because I could create whatever I wanted, as long as I created something. This is where I started Vocab Dance, at Middlesex University, I was asked to create a piece for something, so I got together dancers that I had worked with previously and created something, then we found a name and it progressed from there.

So tell us about your most recent piece of choreography, how did the idea arise? And describe the piece.

Well the latest piece I am working on is called "Lasting" and it's based on relationships between men and women. It's a 10 dancer piece, five male, five female and it's based around the idea that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. The way I came about it was through my own personal relationships and other people's experiences. So I have been doing some research, I have a book called "A Bag of Love Poems" which I looked at different poems and found inspiration and also created a questionnaire made up of 10 different questions about love and asked men and women to answer the questions in one word, the one word had to define how they feel about love and/or the first thing that comes into their head when they think about love.

I then use these words to create movement, which is then developed and combined with looking at situations where men and women do not understand each other, their differences but how they manage to find the right balance in order to coexist, so that was the stimulus for the piece. It is all about relationships, including the ups and the downs and the constant clashing. When I talk to my friend's guys and girls you always hear the same things wherever you are. So I just wanted to explore that further.

Can you share with us more about the process of developing the piece? Taking your ideas from words into movements, and how you then put that onto the bodies of your dancers?

Well I will start with myself as most of the choreography comes from myself, I use the dancers but I always know what I want before I go into the studio I will have an image and the movement. I already see the layout and I usually draw things, patterns, shapes which I work on in my living room. However I also want the input from the dancers and their own personality to be involved in the dance, I may use some of the words and I may ask them to think about what inspires them and what is their emotion when they see the word and to transfer this to movement with certain restrictions. For example the movement may have to go from the floor up to standing into a freeze with a turn. I may also give them a motif which they have to use every two counts within an eight count, then I will look at it and play around with the movement, then we may reverse it and defragment the movement to create different movement.

So how does that work with fusing all the different styles of movement?

It happens very naturally. Basically whatever comes out of my body will be the movement and that is how I work. In a piece called Kwenda-Kwenda, which is the most Afro-contemporary piece I have created. I used pedestrian imagery of cleaning the floor, or folding clothes and depending on how I do it determines what styles it will fuse, but audience members may identify it with street or African dance, it is just whatever comes out of my body. It is my own personal expression, as when I explain it to the dancers I tell them not to think of technique, just think about you when you are doing your movement, don't let technique take over your personality. Do the move then we can use technique to make it or stretch it and make the movement more interesting.

Is there a recognisable, signature within your movement language that can be identified in all the pieces?

Yes I would say the dynamics can be recognised as quite fast and sharp but at the same time when I think about other pieces it is the undulation - use of the back and torso. Because I realise I use the back a lot in terms of how it moves and how it can articulate as sometimes I think ARGGGHHH I have so much pain in my back. The idea of the undulation of the body is a quality that is recognisable in my work.

So you mentioned earlier you are from a mixed heritage, what do you think that brings to your company?

It brings a lot, so much. My dad is Belgian and my mum is South African, so I mean I was brought up from both sides so it opened my mind to different cultures I mean I do not feel uncomfortable in any culture. I also listen to a

variety of music, quite an eclectic mix of music I don't limit myself to one style that would be expected of a Black woman to listen to so that also has an effect with what I do as I can go from classical to rock to house to Hip-hop to this and that. Also I speak different languages - that is why I called my company Vocab. The fact that I use different languages to express myself and that I use different vocabularies of dance to express movement, that I have come from different backgrounds and that I am multi cultural. I embrace anything, so I am attracted to many forms of dance, culture, language, music forms and ideas.

So would you categorise Vocab Dance as part of Black dance in Britain?

I would say yes, however I would not necessarily want to pigeon hole the company. I embrace anyone in my company, my dancers vary from white, mixed heritage and black, however most of my dancers are black or mixed race. I will always support black or mixed race dancers first, as I think we have fewer opportunities, and I think my work and the way I move reflects that. Usually when I audition if you can do the movement and you can feel where it comes from and the origins of it, anyone can dance for me but I usually find dancers with a similar background have a better understanding of it. That is why I usually use dancers from mixed backgrounds. Definitely Black dance as it is inspired by other Black dance.

What is next for Vocab Dance?

Keep climbing the rocky road of the performing arts, in the hope of being funded and being able to do it full-time in terms of employing my dancers, as a lot of my dancers, dance out of love and for a little money here and there. We are going to be performing in Resolution! in February 2009, I am really excited about this as it is something that I have had in mind since I went to University. So my aim for Vocab Dance is to grow and keep growing and to get more recognition, not just the people but the big heads in dance and the people in the industry in terms of funding. We are getting a lot of love from the people. That is good. It would be great to get love from the government.

What about your longer term vision?

I definitely want us to become a touring company. My aim is to dance on Sadler's Wells stage one day, to expand and be recognised here and to have a Vocab Youth one day. To become a big company but one thing at a time hey!

Hip-Hop Circus?!?

Natalie McFarlane learns a bit about the artistic journey of Vicki Amedume, Artistic Director of Upswing Aerial

Tell us about Upswing Aerial. When was the company established and what is its artistic ethos?

Upswing was set up in 2004 by myself and another aerialist call Maria. We were at the time, I think, we were the only two black aerialists working in London and we just gravitated towards each other because we were both interested in the same kind of movement, vocabulary, same kind of work. And we didn't see anything out there that was kind of representing us so we just came together and the company formed quite organically. We made a piece of work and it started touring so we had to set up a company to tour the piece. And the growth of the company has been fairly organic until about 2006 where we realised that there was a lot of momentum behind us and we had to formulate and organise our structures properly.

Once you started the company, how did you go about selecting the dancers and performers?

The dancers that we select for each piece that we make kind of go on a project by project basis. There are a few dancers/aerialists that I have worked with for a number of years that we have developed a vocabulary with so they would be first choice for the pieces that we make. But what we look for are people that are open to trying new things and, obviously, people who are physically fit and strong and athletic. If they have had a grounding in gymnastics or any kind of acrobatics, that is really useful. But it is mainly people who are fit, strong, have a good understanding of the body, how you move. When you start taking dancers in the air there is always a level of disorientation because very rarely are you upside down. And in a lot of aerial work you are functioning upside down and having to orientate yourself by your body rather than by where the ground is and where other people are.

How did you get involved with circus?

My journey with the circus started probably about 15 years ago. I had always been interested in dance and gymnastics and sports. I have done a lot of sports as a young person, lots of athletics so I was fairly fit. But I wanted to be a scientist. Yeah, that was my ambition from being very little. I always wanted to be a scientist so there was always that battle with me between the artistic side and the scientific side. But when I went to University the scientific side won and I studied pharmacology and physiology and did a year of engineering as well. I was basically bouncing round trying to find what it was that I wanted to do. And, this is going to sound really strange, but I lived across the street from two women who ran a circus company call Exponential and I started hanging out with them and they took me to their training space and that was it really. The artistic side just won over. It was the first thing I had done that I had found incredibly challenging, the first thing I had done that molded the physical side of me, the artistic side of me and the scientific side of me. Because there is a lot around aerial, not just the physical performance. There is the rigging, design, all of those aspects really contribute to make a really, really, tight, beautiful product. So it was the first thing I found that I was able to use all of those things that I loved.

It really goes to show that no matter what we do, everything that we do in life is kind of interconnected - because you were able to apply your scientific side to what you are doing now. So are you at the point where you can conclusively say that the artistic side has more prominence? How did you get to be where you are today?

It is interesting that you say "is there a point where the artistic side takes prominence". I think there are phases where the artistic side takes prominence, even now. For the first few years, when I started training aerial, I worked with a number of companies and I was able to function purely as an artist because I was kind of looked after by those companies. I really appreciated that. It gave me a period to develop my physical skills, my technical ability and to understand how to work as part of a group. And then I went through a phase where I left working for UK companies. I went abroad and worked with quite large organisations, quite big circuses, where, again, I was able to function as an artist but in a very different way I was able to concentrate on myself as a solo performer which was amazing. And then I came back to the UK and it all changed again. I had to function as a freelancer where all of a sudden the artistic side isn't so prominent. You are thinking of yourself as a business and marketing yourself and trying to generate work. When I started Upswing with Maria we were able to let the artistic side take over again because we wanted to start something new and create an identity. So we poured out our energy into developing a style and that is an ongoing journey, I don't feel like I have reached the artistic goal that I want to get to yet.

And what is that goal?

I think it is the same goal that all artists have - to make a piece of work that you are completely satisfied with. I haven't done that yet. But things have switched around again now. Upswing has become a Regularly Funded Organisation of the Arts Council. We are becoming a company. Things are becoming much, much more organised and regimented. And I find myself constantly having to swing between being an artist and being an Artistic Director and I think those two things are very different. They support each other but there are different priorities for each.

So how do you strike that balance?

I think it is a constant battle, battle is the wrong word actually, it's a constant struggle to find the right balance and I think part of the pleasure of being where I am at the moment is that struggle - finding the balance. Because that's two sides of my personality that really enjoy functioning as a producer and artistic director and managing a company and the way people view a company nowadays is that you have to see yourself as a business. I find that really fascinating. But I love being able to let go of all that and just think I want to do this as an artist. The two things don't necessarily marry but I think the point where they contact and start to cross over is the point where you are really challenged and I love being challenged.

At what point did you realise this is something I want to do professionally? Tell us more about your personal artistic journey.

It was a really, really tough decision for me to admit that I wanted to do circus professionally. I think from the very first moment I got on a trapeze and started doing it there was some part of me which was like, yes this is it! But the sensible part of my head was going "mmmh hmmm and how are you going to make a living doing this?" And coming from the family that I came from-it's a very traditional African family - all my cousins, aunts, uncles have degrees coming out of their ears, you know. The aspiration is to be a doctor, a lawyer or something professional. It is not to be a circus performer. Where my family comes from, circus is not what it is here. It is not an art form. I think it has taken my mom a long time to realise I am not a pole dancer...(she laughs) so it was a really tough decision but the moment that I did it, I knew that this was what I wanted to. But I was always battling against that because I was struggling to see how I could make a career out of it. I think the point where I decided that I was going to pursue it professionally and made a conscious decision rather than trying to fit all the aspects of my life together was when I decided to take a place at a training course in France - The National Circus School and it was the first real commitment I had made. I had managed to fit the other work I had done with UK companies around whilst still functioning in education - doing a masters and then in the summers I'd be running off to go work with circus companies and training every evening, keeping fit and learning new skills and gathering as much information as I could on a kind of ad hoc basis. But when I decided to go to France and enroll in a proper training program that is when I knew that I had stepped out of the other world. I am in this world and I have to make a go of it.

What would say are you greatest personal achievements to date?

I have been, as I said, in circus for about 15 years and I think my greatest personal achievement is still being here. (She laughs animatedly) I think it is really tough for artists in the UK to keep going. There is so much of life that you miss out on or you have to sacrifice in order to keep making your own work. So I think that my greatest personal achievement is to still be here and to still be able to make my own work rather than have to work for other people.

And what are Upswing's greatest achievements to date?

(Pauses to ponder) That's a really, really tough question to answer. I think we have done a lot of really interesting work artistically and I think we are really trying to push the boundaries of what you can express with circus and how you can use circus. I think our greatest achievement has been the way that we are trying to mix art forms with bringing in Hip-Hop into circus, bringing contemporary dance into circus. I think our greatest achievement is that and, I don't know whether it is a strength or not, but every piece of work that we have done has always been different. There has always been an evolution and we haven't been static, repeating the same things. I don't think we have ever made the same piece of work and I don't think I could repeat work that I have made in the past because it is an evolution and I feel like I am very much on a journey.

Your piece Loved Up mixes Hip-Hop dance with aerial circus. How did the idea arise?

Loved up was a piece that we made in 2006. And it was an exploration of how you could mix Hip-Hop into circus. I was really excited by Hip-Hop and street dance. Maria, who I started Upswing with, was really into street dance and I really loved street dance and what I loved about street dance was the energy of it, the speed, the dynamism of it and sometimes my frustration with the aerial work or the equipment that we were using at the time was that

you couldn't get that same dynamic energy unless you were dropping. But it was hard to get choreographically complex with what we were doing. For traditional aerial work on upright equipment, a lot of your energy is expended staying in the air, staying where you are and you are always holding on in some way with one limb or another, so it kind of limits the range of movement that you had. And at the same time I had just spent some time in South Africa, I had been working out there and I met Jonzi D and we just started talking and we were really interested in finding a way to bring a few things together so we just locked ourselves in a room for a couple of weeks really with a few artists and we came up with Loved Up. I know that sounds like it just happened by magic but what happened is there was a lot of talking before. There was a lot of talking about the different ways we could bring the things together and there was a lot of play - we spent a few days experimenting with a few dancers who were really great and gave us their time and then we just thought ok, we are going to work this way. We shut ourselves in a room for a couple weeks and we made a piece. It kind of just flowed out.

Can you share with us some more about the process of developing the piece?

I think the process is always evolving and I think the trick with circus, particularly in making circus work is keeping the process as creative just because there are so many technical aspects to the work. And you can get stuck in technicality and you can get stuck in technically delivering tricks. It's about keeping the process fluid and creative so that you can kind of look beyond traditional aesthetic and look beyond obvious ways of using bits of equipment and find kind of novel ways of movement. The great thing about the Loved Up process was that Jonzi D had not worked with circus before and he was coming at it with really fresh eyes, which was cool. And, I don't know, what was the process, ahmm, we played a lot and it was part of the key of keeping things energized and creative. There is a point where you have to start setting material and you have to be quite structured about how you do that but one of the key things was allowing ourselves some time to play and enjoy it and have fun and find out what the pleasure would be for the audience watching that piece. And that piece is great because there is a real sense of joy about it - the way that the performers fly but they are still in contact with the ground, they are still able to communicate with each other and make contact with each other. And they had a real sense of joy about what they were doing which I don't think we would have found if we didn't play as much as we did. But the process for making each piece of work is different depending on what you are trying to achieve.

When did the show debut?

In 2006, we were commissioned by the Trafalgar Square Festival which is an initiative that was set up by the Mayor of London to create a three week arts festival in Trafalgar Square and it was amazing to be part of that. Because there were other performances, other companies showing new work and this piece was new and fairly experimental and we really did not know how people would take it. It was a bit of a risk. But it went down really well. That show is so fun and so exciting. The audience really went with it and we learnt so much making that first piece of work, since then I have been reworking the piece and I think the piece is, next year, going to go on another stage of development. What we have at the moment is a really, really, tight physical exploration and it is light and it is fun. Next year I am looking to work with a spoken word artist or a writer to kind of help develop mini narratives and expand the piece and look at if we can now communicate concept and idea with the piece rather than it just being a physical exercise because I think I have moved past that now.

Why Hip-Hop/Street Dance and Circus together? What kinds of connections are there between the two?

I think there are really, really strong connections between the two just because we are two arts forms at the moment that are struggling to be accepted as credible and it is frustrating. I read a review of a Hip-Hop piece that went out a while ago that said, something like, it's all very nice but it is actually for a minority audience. This was by a theatre reviewer and I thought the reviewer has failed to realise that the minority is actually the majority of the population that is into Hip-hop and street dance. The same with circus. A week later I read a review of a circus piece, which was a piece done by an artist that I really respect. And she made this really beautiful rope piece and the reviewer at the end of it said, it was all very nice but it doesn't amount to a series of tricks. And I was like, he is not looking. And I think both art forms speak to quite wide audiences. The great thing about circus and Hip-Hop is that you can appreciate the skill but if you get it right it can also communicate something really, really powerful. I think they are both forms that people don't really understand or don't have anything to judge them against. If you are working in ballet or another form of dance people always have something to judge you against so they can say that's good because I understand this about it. Whereas with circus and Hip-Hop, there aren't documented forms.

And given that reviews are mostly subjective, how much of an impact do these have on the perception of the art form by the dance community?

Reviews are for a certain section of the community. I mean our work and a lot of other work appeals to people who probably traditionally would not go to the theatre and therefore wouldn't traditionally read reviews. I think reviews are more for the artistic community if you are trying to move work on in the future, you need strong reviews and you need the artistic community to understand what you are doing because the people who control the money and the venues are the people who read the Guardian and the reviews. So that's the struggle. We may appeal to huge audiences but the artistic community needs to understand how to connect with our work, how to market it or how to judge it for us to progress.

So, what's next for Upswing?

Hopefully, there will be collaboration with ADAD. This next year is really going to be very much a year of development. We have been very lucky in getting some core funding and we want to use that wisely to kind of take some time to consider what we do and put some time into developing the quality of our work. The struggle for us in the past is we have always worked on a project and project basis and it has always been commissions or working to somebody else's schedule. The same with everybody. If you are getting the money from somewhere, it always comes with strings attached and a deadline and it doesn't always allow you to be completely flexible or free about what you make. You can't take risks and I guess in some ways you have to hold back. We have been really lucky and I want to use next year as a year for exploration. And the thing I am really keen to explore is collaborations with other artists outside of circus, outside of what I know. Just because I feel there is a lot of information and a lot of learning I need to do and the best way to do that is collaborating with people who are really good at what they already do.

It is intriguing that you have never created a piece of work that you are fully satisfied with, what would it take for you to really get there or are you that much of a perfectionist that you may never really get there because you are always looking at ways to improve a piece...?

I'm a Libran, what can I say. (She laughs with a twinkle in her eye) I don't know if I will ever produce something that I am fully satisfied with but I think there are levels of satisfaction that you can achieve. And I think it's about having enough freedom to take risks. In the past there have always been some restrictions on how much of a risk you can take and I think there I always restrictions on how much risk you can take. Even where we are now, we can't completely go mental and go off the wall. Off the wall, hmm, that's a good concept... (She says laughing)... But it's also a factor of time. I am now able to give myself time and hopefully that will take me closer to what I hope to achieve artistically.

So should dancers or choreographers interested in working with Upswing get in contact with you?

Yes, they should give me a call! We are keen to make contact with dancers and choreographers as much as they are keen to work with us on aerial and circus work. So this year we are looking to set up a series of processes where we can share. This will be done through a series of workshops for dancers and choreographers in a space called the Hanger Arts in Southeast London. We'll reveal more details closer to the time.

James Mweu of Kunja Dance Theatre, Kenya



Interviewed by Jeanette Bain-Bumett

James Mweu is Director of Nairobi-based Kunja Dance Theatre. Trained originally as a sculptor, James Mweu is one of the young generation of new Kenyan choreographers and dancers, who work with Kenya's influential dance artist Opiyo Okach and his company Gàara projects. James Mweu performed in Opiyo Okach's seminal production Shift: Centre, with which he toured worldwide, inc. South Africa, France, Germany, Italy, and Brazil. In 2004 he started his own company Kunja Dance Theatre, building up a repertoire of his own works. His 2005 duet Urbanite was shortlisted for the prestigious biennial pan-African dance competition Danse l'Afrique Danse in 2008.

Kunja Dance Theatre also leads pioneering outreach and education activities with different communities in Nairobi. It regularly works with street children, young acrobatics of the Kuruka Maisha Arts School and internally displaced people following the political unrests in December 2007. In 2007 Woking Dance Festival invited James Mweu for his first visit to the UK as one of its international Dance Dialogues artists. He performed his solo Kizazi at the Rhoda McGaw Theatre in October 2007. During his 2nd visit in autumn 08 he collaborated with Akram Khan company dancer Saju Hari to perform in a new production of In The Thick of It, a short piece especially created for young children and touring Surrey primary schools.

During his visit in October, I had the opportunity to catch up with him and learn more about his work.

How did you make the connection with Woking Dance Festival and the Dance Dialogues project?

I met Eckhard Thiemann (former Director of Woking Dance Festival) in 2005 at Godown Arts Centre in Nairobi. In 2006, I was presenting work at community centres in Nairobi as part of a boys' project and Eckhard saw a solo I had choreographed on one of the boys who was 14 years old at the time. That was when he proposed that I could come and be a part of the Dance Dialogues exchange programme.

So in October 2007, I came on my first trip to the UK, along with Kebaya Moturi. I've now come for a second trip on my own.

What were your first impressions of the UK Dance scene?

I was impressed by the community centres and arts centres that work with Woking. I was impressed mainly because work at home is self-produced. There is not as much infrastructure. When I do a series of performances at community centres, it's less structured. I am among the pioneers. Here, there is a structure, funding, support and a network. I felt well supported and to top it all, I was being paid!

So what are the funding structures like in Kenya?

There is a small amount of funding from the City Council of Nairobi and there is one other private funding body running a pilot with my boys' project. But most of what we do is self-funded.

Which UK artist was involved in the Dance Dialogues exchange?

Saju Hari came to Kenya and worked with the boys' project with me and performed at a number of arts centres. He came twice. The second time he did creative work with Kebaya at Godown. During that second trip we also spent time with Kofi Koko. He came down to Nairobi. We all had long nights together of discussion and dreaming.

What kinds of discussions and dreams?

We would talk about our work - sharing different perspectives and angles. We would talk about Africa. What is the problem with Africa? Long discussions...

And what motivates you as a dance artist?

What motivates me is the freedom of expression that my art gives me -when we perform with boys and girls in the communities, when I present work to academics and the arts community. I am excited by the possibilities that my art opens.

We make work with visual artists, musicians, storytellers. I love incorporating the different aspects of expression.

So there is a lot of collaboration between artists?

Yes, there's a lot of that. I used to work for Opiyo Okach's company. We all work on each other's projects. A few years ago the Ford Foundation for media, arts and culture funded a 3 day 'conversation' between East African dance artists. It included artists from Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya discussing their histories, aspirations, challenges and inspirations and the result was a report called Blueprint to Dance in East Africa. It included artists like Kebaya and Matthew Ondiege (who runs an integrated dance company).

So how did you kick-start your own career and your company?

Well, I was a sculptor. I did welding and carving. I then started dancing with various projects, including Opiyo's company.

A sculptor? Do you still work in that area?No, not anymore. Now I'm sculpting lives. I'm Artistic Director of the Street Boys project. I find teachers, dancers, do all the organising. I also have 10 boys that I have chosen to do experimental projects. We have a network of performance venues where we show work, which has developed very naturally. The boys propose new places to perform. We started out as Jamo & Co. We have now changed our name to Kunja Dance Theatre.

What does Kunja mean?

It means 'to coil and uncoil'. When I used to go to dance class the boys would say 'Are you going to kujikunja?' (an expression describing how we would move our body). So when we collectively decided to form a group with consistent members we established Kunja. We started in early 2004 and registered with the ministry in 2005.

How do you sustain the company?

We don't all work full-time for Kunja. The artists have a lot of different skills. Most of them are acrobats part-time.

So what's next for Kunja Dance Theatre?

We are working on a new duet which we will tour to Lagos, Nigeria in a few months for a festival called Dance meets Dance.

Irie! Dance Theatre has recently launched a new Foundation Degree in Dance and Diversity based in their studios at The Moonshot Centre in New Cross, London. The course, which is being offered in partnership with London Metropolitan University and City and Islington College, provides technical training in African, Caribbean, Contemporary and Ballet dance, as well as contextual studies. It is led by Beverley Glean from Irie! and Rosie Lehan from City and Islington College. As the first semester drew to an end in December 2008, I had the opportunity to hear the perspectives of three students: Anya Sobornova, Sheika Edwards and Alison Fury.

JB: Tell me a little bit about your background and what brought you to Irie! Dance Theatre's Foundation Degree.

AF: My background is that I'm a doctor, but I've come to Irie! via various community dance courses and vocational training at Morley College. That vocational training had mixtures of Capoeira and Hip-hop dance mixed with Contemporary, so I knew that I liked fusion. I've also been associated with the Carl Campbell Dance Company in Peckham for a long time.

JB: So is this a career break for you, or a change of direction?

AF: No I'm actually still working as well – freelance, and I'm hoping that I can carry on doing the two together. I'm very interested in choreography, so I'm thinking that maybe I can use one to fund the other and start up a dance company, but I have no idea at this stage. At this stage, I'm not planning on giving up my other career completely, because I've invested too much in it.

SE: Well, I'm 23 and I've been in technical dance training for about 5 years. After I did my A levels I opted out of going to University to do Graphics and decided to do dance instead. I'm a bit of a late starter – I did dance in school but no other training apart from that. So I started off doing a foundation course at Kensington and Chelsea College, then went to Lewisham College. They're known for their hard, full-on course – because it's for late beginners so it was a great place for me to go. I think it's prepared me for any sort of course. Last year I wasn't in any formal training but I did open classes. I was looking for a course and I heard about this course by word of mouth. I knew about the dance company, but I didn't know that they offered a course. I knew they did a summer school but that was about it. So I came and auditioned and they were really open. The course is new and it was a very relaxed atmosphere. The process included an informal interview and I liked that they were asking me about myself and my background. I think this course is the right pace – not too intense but not too relaxed either. I think it's right for me.

AS: I've done dance since I was very little but I haven't had a formal qualification. I've kind of meandered and done bits and pieces but I've never completed anything. So that's why I came to this course – to cement it and get a piece of paper and to get the formality and structure. It's nice because it reins you in and you get the feedback and the support. Like Sheika, I've heard of the company before and also heard a bit about the courses they used to run, but one year they weren't able to run it and the next year they had no places left. It was actually just by chance this time around that I rang up in early September and they still had a place and took me. It was good because I have really wanted to do this course for a long time. I was interested in the course mainly because of the African and Caribbean side of it, because there's no other institution that's offering it at this level of intensity. You can go and do open classes and all the rest of it but this course helps you to focus in and actually gives you certification at the end of it and really delves deep into it.

JB: Anja, you've started to answer my next question, which is why did you choose this course, rather than going somewhere else?

SE: Yeah, it is the diversity of the Western and Caribbean coming together. I hope to learn the tools and the skills to actually work with both. We have training in classical Ballet and Contemporary as well. But it's to know how to use that diversity and to learn the similarities and the differences and how they evolved. That's what I'd like to do from a choreographic perspective, so that I can go on to use what I have learned to create dance myself.

AF: Very similar thing. I was also very attracted to the African and Caribbean elements, but also to the possibility to get better at Contemporary technique and to fuse them. Other courses tend to be very narrow in their focus – either very Contemporary or just Ballet and I didn't want to do either of those.

JB: What have been the highlights of the first semester of the course?

AS: They took us to see a few shows and I really liked that. The companies that we went to see were the Jasmin Vardimon Company and DV8. Those were probably the two best works I'd ever seen – especially DV8. It really opened up our eyes to using text and media and we came back and we all want to use it in our choreography. After seeing someone else use it, you realise that it can work and look great. For me as well I'd say I love having the live drumming in class because that gives you the atmosphere and you get the drum breaks to count you into the movement and he can change the tempo so if you're not getting something you have that live interaction that you wouldn't get if you were just using a CD. So you can break it down so you really get the rhythms.

AF: The Jasmin Vardimon Company came and gave us a workshop and their work was so physically daring that it was quite a revelation to see that it was actually possible to do some of the things that they were doing without hurting yourself but that you could actually have a go. The other thing for me is that our group is only 10 people, so you get a lot of individual attention.

SE: I was also going to talk about the workshops. We've done a few workshops and had people covering classes and it's been good to get different takes on dance. For example, our main African dance teacher is from South Africa and we had a guest from West Africa. That helped us to see the difference of styles and understand more deeply what we were engaging with. We also had a jazz workshop and I think that being exposed to all these different styles is going to help us not to be limited.

AS: We also had someone come in and do salsa and we had a group called C12, who have worked with Irie! and have taken a course with Rosie and Beverley before so it was really good for us. The piece that they performed was really good and everyone loved it. So it was nice to see that they are past students and to kind of see yourself and have that aspiration and to think this course can take you there.

JB: So you have two years on the course. What are you looking forward to over the remaining year and a half?

AS: I can't wait until the placement in our second year. Because we get a short work placement that we'll organise ourselves – in a company or dance agency. So we're really going to get out there, but with the ongoing support of our tutors. And also, I really enjoy doing the theory side of things, so I'm looking forward to doing dance history next semester. Then we also have arts administration in our second year and a part of that course is us organising our own event – raising the money and running the event. So it gives us that hands-on experience with the finances and everything.

AF: I'm looking forward to the end of January when we're going to show our duets and solos to friends. I'm looking forward to how that's received. I'm looking forward to knowing a lot more about how to go about doing choreography and experimenting as much as we can. And also being a better dancer at the end of the course than I was at the beginning– which won't be hard!

SE: Yeah – me as well. I want to see what I produce choreographically because it is such a big part of the course. I want to see how I develop in that area. Also - now that we're learning Caribbean and African - because I hadn't done it before... (I didn't even know that there was Caribbean dance in itself – I didn't separate the two, it almost was one to me.) ...So to get that in my body so I'm actually dancing it and to know that I'm using the facility in my body to actually do it to the best of my ability- and it really becoming a part of my movement vocabulary.

AS: We're also interacting with the other departments and later after New Year, we're working with the photography students to take headshots and create a portfolio. I think that's going to be interesting. Then later we'll be collaborating with different departments for choreography, so some of it will be dance film, costumes, incorporating media. Then we've got links to other people, which is nice because it gives us that professional experience of working to deadlines and communicating with people. I think all round it's going to be interesting and very useful.

JB: In the course, what styles have you worked with so far?

AS: We've done Ballet, Contemporary (Limon), South African, traditional Caribbean like Quadrilles, Kumina, Dinkie mini, and we had Yael Mohammed (?) come in and teach us Ghanaian from different tribes in Ghana.

JB: Does each of you have a favourite – if you had to pick one – which one are you drawn to?

SE: I like the Dinkie mini – even though it's hard. I like that it actually has meaning. I like the songs that go with it. You can't help but be connected or find a connection somewhere. It just makes it easier. Mashing is my favourite thing to do!

AS: Chicken Scratch is legendary!

SE: Yeah – Caribbean's been really good for me because that's where my roots are from. So it's getting in contact with that and really delving deep and seeing the value in Caribbean.

AS: I like everything and at the moment you're working really hard on the technique in all your classes. I probably enjoy Caribbean the most with the live music and everything. Obviously there is technique and they want us to reach our maximum and perfect the technique but at the same time one thing that Jackie Guy always emphasises is not worrying about getting it perfect – just really dancing: 'Exude that energy and enjoy it because I can teach you how to do the technique but nobody can teach you how to dance it, how to express yourself like that'. So that's why I really enjoy that class and especially today because we were choreographing our own bits, using the movement ourselves. In that class I always feel like I'm properly dancing. I'm not thinking too much. I just let go and I'm just dancing. It's more enjoyable and I really love the energy of it.

AF: I think I like the African, but it does change from week to week as well.

JB: Each of you has said that you were attracted to this course because it has diversity of styles. Why would you say diversity is important to you in dance?

AS: I think part of it is because for example with some dance, like Ballet, it's very set; there are very set rules and set body types and the way you should be in your conditioning and everything. But with Contemporary and African and Caribbean it allows more room for your individuality and for you to express yourself in your own way rather than – 'this is how you have to do it'. Generally because it's more reflective of our environment – we grow up exposed to those cultures anyway. So we have an interest in Caribbean dance from listening to dancehall and going out. Naturally you're exposed to it so you want to know more about it and develop that, because it's part of your culture now – living in London.

SE: That was the perfect answer really! I think that if you want to be an innovative dancer and choreographer, you need something fresh to challenge yourself. And also the more you take in is the more you're going to have to use and pull on. The more you fill yourself up. To limit yourself seems ridiculous – even with styles of music. Rosie and Beverley encourage you to listen to everything. And it's because the more you listen to, you can really make clear decisions on what you like or what you want to use or what route you want to take and that's how you develop yourself in dance or any other area.

AS: Even though Ballet and African are quite different because one is grounded and it's more about rhythms, for me, like you were saying about combining the styles – for me I think African dance and Ballet are the foundation of all other dances – you get jazz, tap, in Latin dances you see the undulations, you see all those things. So if you know those two you've got the grounding to do pretty much anything because you know the basics. I think the two actually complement each other really well. In Ballet you're really held up doing things on point and demi-point and then in African you'll be in plié all the time. So even for your muscles I think it's very good because one is stretching you and the other is contracting. It's almost like injury prevention as well because you'll be really pulled up and then in African you'll be using your rib cage so at the same time it relaxes and stretches you so it creates the balance.

AF: I think it's just richer having all the dance forms, and you don't just get the dance, you also get the music. So you get 'more for your money'.

JB: So what is your big dream? What are you driving towards?

SE: With Iriel's connections with other companies, particularly abroad, it's actually made me think more about studying abroad. I never really thought that before, I was really narrow-minded – I thought everything was here.

There's so much that I'm missing now – learning African and Caribbean, I'm realising that I have actually been really narrow-minded. So I'd like to go abroad and do a few more years of studying. Then maybe I'll have enough ideas and life experience to start choreographing.

AF: I've kind of said it. I want to dabble in choreography and I don't know if I'll be able to have my own company and do some experimenting there or whether I can look for opportunities out there in the big wide world. Maybe even with theatre, where you've got movement and dance in plays so you could choreograph for that type of thing. I don't really know what's out there, but I'd quite like to have a go at it.

AS: With me, it's just kinda hard because there are so many different things that I'd like to do. My main interest that I want to develop is in dance film. That's what I want to work in, and also choreography. And like Sheika said, because I've done some dancing abroad, I'd like to go to Edna Manley in Jamaica to study, or to go to Cuba and study with the company I was with before.

JB: You have all mentioned choreography, what kind of work would you like to make? Do you each have a vision?

SE: Dance Theatre because I'm interested in narrative and actually saying something – I think that there's a lot to say. I'd like to have a professional company – It's going to be called Convictions Dance Company (watch that name!) but I also want to do community work. I love to see amateur dancers coming in and working with professionals. I'm interested in everyday life experience because I think that's what art should be about.

AS: Right now in choreography, we're researching our themes and I really like that part. So I think my dream job would be as an artistic director so I'm doing the research and coming up with ideas. So I would love to be able to work with a choreographer who could translate that into movement. So maybe Sheika and I could work together – I bring the ideas and she actually puts it together.

SE: You're hired!

AF: I need to find out what's out there first. I wouldn't restrict myself to pure dance. Just as an example there was an African Gentlemen of Verona at the Oval House recently and they had movement and dance in it, and I would quite like to land some sort of a job doing that, I think. Don't know if I'll be successful, but I'd like to have a go!