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What is Contemporary Dance in Africa?

Today's African choreographers may change what you think you know about dance coming from the Continent

by Darlisa Wajid-Ali

When we think about African dance, what do we think? What kinds of sights, sounds, and associations does the phrase “African dance” conjure? Where do these ideas come from? The dance documentary *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (directed by Joan Frosch, 2007) seeks to redefine existing definitions of African artistry, dismantle colonial stereotypes, and reveal the presence of current contemporary artists creating work in Africa. This film can expand Western audiences’ knowledge about contemporary African artists and their respective creative processes.

African dance as a relevant form, not frozen in time

This documentary challenges the notion that African dance exists solely as a traditional form. “Traditional,” in this sense, refers to dances that are centuries old and continue to be taught and performed around the world. In West Africa, popular dances include Lamban, Sunu, Marjaani, and Adzogbo, to name just a few. In this film, prominent artists from different countries in Africa convincingly argue that their movement should be defined as contemporary dance. This title is justified because they are creating new work that speaks to their current environment.

This film reveals how artists in Africa are engaging in new forms of expression. Many African dance classes in America are focused on the traditional steps, and I believe this creates an incomplete view that African dance stopped evolving after the 17th century. Many dancers might recognize and acknowledge the presence of African dance in forms like jazz and hip hop. However, when it comes to understanding movement that comes directly from the continent, I believe many dancers (myself included, before I saw this film) think of African dance as archaic, old, and related only to the past. The genre of African dance, as it is taught in many studios in America, tends to maintain the century-old steps. This documentary reveals that there are a multitude of artists in Africa making new and exciting work that is reflective of who they are and where they are today. These artists challenge the audience to re-think how we define African dance. After watching this film, I am inspired to learn more about them and visit their rehearsal/performance venues in their respective countries. It is my hope that by showing this film to other students, they too may be inspired to form bridges with dance artists in Africa.

African dance as a universal, global phenomenon

The presence of African dance can be felt all over the world. Yet, how aware are we of its presence? While this film highlights the talents of selected artists, I couldn't help but wonder why I have heard of only one of them, U.S.-based Nora Chipaumarie. I happened to spot her picture in a small column in *Dance Magazine* once, and only once, which is surprising from a magazine that promotes artists from all over the world. I

believe every corner of the world has been touched by African dance in some way, and yet, very little credit is given to the magnitude of African contribution to global culture.

This documentary shows contemporary artists making work with their distinctive voices as African people. One artist raises the question, why should they be isolated and asked to come together for no other reason than that they are all black? Where is the space for others to participate, contribute, and be influenced by contact with these African artists? This artist raises an important, albeit complicated issue, about “black dance.” The need to categorize is problematic, as black dance should be considered dance, period. And yet, with the history of slavery, colonialism and anti-blackness, it’s troublesome not to label and distinguish, after centuries of debasement and marginalization. This film portrays these artists, their processes, and their complexities as dance-makers, and yet it is defined by its blackness.

Many mainstream media outlets in America tend to highlight accomplishments made by white, Caucasian and/or European artists. Very few of these accolades are given to people of color. This quandary cannot be resolved in a single moment, since it is a difficult and complex question to grapple with: how do the innovations and expressions of African music and dance make their way across the globe, and how many African contributions are credited? As a dance educator, I recommend this film to inform other dancers about the kinds of contributions being made today by contemporary African artists.

African dance as widely varied, challenging colonial generalizations

This documentary reveals the differences and nuances within each contemporary artist, as well as their unique approaches to their choreographies. This challenges colonial perspectives that African dance can only be one or two things, namely expressive and energetic. The film shows that African dance can be complex, symbolic, provocative, engaging, disturbing, light-hearted, technical, theatrical, and sculptural, to name a few aspects. Each artist speaks to their personal influences and intentions of their works, showing their intellectual and artistic perspectives, which allows the audience to understand the work better.

This multi-faceted representation of several contemporary African artists helps dismantle shallow and over-generalized notions about African dance. This film is a request that Western audiences stop defining African dance. It is up to the African artists to determine what it means to be an African dancer, or to create an African dance, and the Western audience should listen and accept. Maps of the world found in many classrooms in America do not even show the continents to scale. Africa is the largest continent on this planet, and the scope of its artistry is just as magnanimous. However, a map that shrinks Africa and enlarges Europe can allude to how a Western education can prioritize only certain people and places. Being able to broaden our view of what African dance looks like, and where it comes from, is an important lesson to learn.

As an educator, I am pushing for more specificity when we speak about African dance in my country. In America, the majority of “African” dance performances that reach the stage are usually derived from West Africa. I believe that the American audience should be more informed about how different African dances can be, and be able to recognize these regional differences, especially amongst the traditional dances. This documentary presents a wide berth of artists in terms of age, gender, personality and

artistic aesthetics. This diversity challenges the viewer to consider the variety within contemporary African dance.

African dance as innovative, alive, and expressive

The most important lesson I took away from this film, which I would like to impart to my students, is that African dance is alive and constantly evolving. It is part of who we are and how we move, and we are free to create something new with what we are given. Because of this film, I feel more validated in my own process as a creator and contemporary artist. I can recall moments when I felt like I was betraying my ancestry because, instead of preserving the dance in its original form, I wanted to take the knowledge somewhere else. The tension between maintaining and reimagining traditional techniques is present in many other styles of dance, including classical Indian and ballet. It is an interesting debate to bring to my students: do we innovate, or do we preserve? What is the value of maintaining the codified form? At what point do we decide to move forward and create something new?

These questions rattle my mission as a choreographer and dance teacher, especially since I want to pay homage to what came before and not simplify the technique. I said recently to my dancers in rehearsal, “This move has developed over thousands of years. Just take a moment to think about that. This one step has developed for thousands of years, and it’s a really good step, so I think we better maintain its integrity.” At this point, I ask myself, what are we trying to maintain? Is it the step? The story? The ritual? The culture? Dance is reflective of the world in which people find themselves. The documentary raises the important concern of how we compare ourselves to those who lived hundreds of years ago, and the freedom needed to look to the past, but not live in it.

Darlisa Wajid-Ali received her B.A. in Dance and Theater, with a minor in History from Manhattanville College, and in 2016, her M.F.A. in Dance from UC Irvine. She has studied West African, Bollywood, Modern, Jazz, and Classical Indian dance in America and India. She currently teaches dance at USC Hybrid High School, and online dance history for Saddleback College. She is also a company member of the LA-based Bollywood dance company, Joya Kazi Unlimited.
