



# African dance aesthetics and border thinking with 'Funmi Adewole (2017)

*(automated transcript from otter.ai)*

## **SPEAKERS**

'Funmi Adewole

*(Introduction: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021 over spare guitar chords)*

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*This is a field recording of variable quality with a live audience at Siobhan Davies Studios.*

*(2017 audio or video file begins)*

## **'Funmi Adewole**

So, my name is 'Funmi Adewole and I'm a lecturer at De Montfort University in Leicester. And I just started my first full time post in October. And before that, I've been a freelancer for most of my life. And I mentioned it because I think it's relevant to what we're discussing. So, I did a degree in English and French, I hardly tell people this because I don't speak French very well. I did it in Nigeria. And then I worked there as a journalist. But while I was there, I, you know, took part in a lot of performance. And my contact with dance was very much very urban. I was born in I was born in England, actually. But my family moved back to Nigeria when I was about eight. So, it was Lagos where I lived, and I was into Afro beat in the 1970, Afro beat, not Afro beats, completely different genre. So, into Afro beat And then when I went to university, I discovered what we call African dance drama. And I think this the nearest to that here would be physical theatre. So, it was dancing with a narrator who would come on stage and tell the story and traditional dances might be going on in the background. So that was me. And then I was the artistic director of the poetry club. So, I was really into, and we used to perform poetry where we would narrate the poetry and sometimes there'll be dance and drumming, so it was all very rhythmic and dancey. So, I went from that into journalism, mainly arts journalism in Nigeria, and when I moved to England in 94, it was an opportunity to do something completely different. And so I realised I had picked up enough experience dancing in university I took some Theatre Dance courses, and my was in also in the youth dance. What would you what you would call youth dance here. And I was, I used to choreograph also in youth dance context is and I realised when I started auditioning that I knew enough to get jobs mainly working with art in within African performance and African dance drama. There are two places where I used to go I used to go to the Brixton Rock, which sadly no longer exists, which was a studio under the bridge in Brixton, Brixton rock. And there was all these small African dance companies there that used to tour the music circuit and I used to take dance classes with them, sometimes they went into schools and did that kind of work. So, I learned a lot of African dances, they're much more than I learned in Nigeria, obviously, because he was multicultural. So, he had an Africans from Senegal and Ghana and so I was learning a range of dances and then my other hang out was Chisenhale Dance space where I, you know, confronted Bhutto, and release technique and took, took anything really. And so I was in between these two worlds. And then I've worked in many contexts. I worked as a performer, a dancer. I've worked as an actress, a journalist, teacher, like most performers, you do lots of stuff in managed companies. I was chair of the Association of dance or the African diaspora. This is my equivalent person now. And lately, when I say lately, from about 2013, I started to become a dramaturg. And how I got into dramaturgy is very funny. I did a performance at Arcola, which was me telling stood playing children's

games and running around in a circle. And it wasn't really done very well in Arcola because a physical theatre festival and Kiki Gale who is the director of East London Dance and loved it, and she invited me to East London dance to perform it. So I was part of an event called Local Global or Global Local dance. And the piece sunk like a brick. Everybody hated it. My friends were waving to me from a distance, no one wanted to talk to me that evening, that's a lie. A lot of non dancers came up to me and said really liked your piece. It reminded me of my childhood. I used to play that game. But all the dancers were looking at me very suspiciously that night, which, you know, taught me something about context. We went from Arcola, which is physical theatre to dance to that. But one of the artists performing that night Alexandra Seutin, she came up to me and she goes, I saw your piece, I said, yes. Could you be my dramaturg? And I thought, my piece didn't go very well. But there was something in it that she felt I'd understand what she did. And that's how I got into dramaturgy and I never advertised myself. It's just been word of mouth. So, I've worked with quite a few professional artists now. And this has got me on to the topic we're talking about now today, African dance aesthetics and border thinking. So, my aim today is just to discuss the complexity of working with social and traditional dance forms within a theatre space. Is that what I wrote there? As it relates to language, and dance tends to be considered to be a nonverbal art form. And anyone that speaks during a dance performance is considered to be breaking a boundary. But I'm not really talking about talking within the piece. I'm talking about the conversations around performance. And that's the complexity I'm talking about. Because I'm talking about how do performances communicate? And why do we want to communicate? You know, a lot of a lot of choreographers will say I don't want to explain my work. My work should speak for itself. I probably say that too. But they want people to be talking about their work. They don't want to sort of lead the conversation, or they want people to speculate and consider the work. They don't want to define it. But for that to happen, there has to be a history of discussion. If there's no history of discussion prior that no one will know what to say about that work. So, if I bring let's try to think of somebody in history, let's think of Isadora Duncan. And so when she started performing, my impression is that classical ballet was the big thing. So this woman comes out and she's wearing a Greek tunic, and she's running around talking about nature. And everybody goes, Wow, because it's a departure from what is considered to be dance of a certain type. And so she said many things about her dance, but if she didn't want to people have something to compare it with and talk about, and the conversations around theatre, very important. And many people go into theatre because of that conversation. And so I'm going to talk about two concepts. One is African dance aesthetics, and the other is border thinking because my title is African dance aesthetics and border thinking. So, I should really say what I mean. African dance aesthetics is a wide category. Any dance that is influenced by African dance forms, has African dance aesthetics, that's a simple definition. But that of course, could include everything from all the dances in Africa, all the social dances, all the dance techniques that people make from African dances. So Acogny technique, for example, would be considered having African dance aesthetics, even though Acogny technique is developed for theatre, theatrical performance and studio-based teaching. And something like the batard dance which emerged from a community and is performed at the Festival of the god of thunder. Both of them have African dance aesthetic, so it's very wide. It covers different types of dances breakdancing has African dances aesthetics, Capoeira has African dance aesthetics different continent, Brazil, America, but all of these forms, I mean, many Latin dances, rumba, cha, cha, merengue, you know, African dance aesthetics it's very, very broad. And some people will argue why are we using such broad terms? Why is important that we group everything together, but that's what it is. So, it's not about it's not defining a dance type. It's not defining a dance category. Well, you could say it's defining a category, but a very broad one. The next one is border thinking. So, I've just put a map because I think the idea of borders we think about borders between countries are thinking about boundaries. And we're also thinking about links, maybe links between places. And we're thinking about why is it important to relate to borders? And I thought, if I just launched into defining this, I didn't think we'll have a really good understanding of why I think all the thinking is important. So, I thought I'll ask you some questions. First, what is theatrical dance and what is choreography? So, I'd like to hear your opinions on these two things. Let's start with the first one. What would you define theatrical dance to be? The gentleman over there with the nice hair. No answers are wrong. All right, by the way because every answer will, will prove my point. I hope she crosses her fingers what would you say theatrical dance is?

#### **Audience**

I guess it involves some theatrical techniques? Or character things?

#### **'Funmi Adewole**

So you're talking about dances that have certain techniques? Is it like techniques of dance? Or you said character? So you're talking about maybe a style of theatre?

#### **Audience**

In any theatre, you've got some characters actually, because being on stages playing and playing is playing a character. Even if you're playing yourself, you're still playing character, the character of yourself.

**'Funmi Adewole**

But you said the important thing you said stage. And I agree with you. That's why put the Southbank because there's at least two stages in that building. I think the Purcell Room and Ballroom is sometimes the stage and then there's a stage somewhere here in Queen Elizabeth Hall. So that's what I put that there. So stage is important. Any other idea about what theatrical dance is?

**Audience**

it's like a showmanship because it involves an audience. Yes. Like you're presenting to an audience

**'Funmi Adewole**

So dance presented to an audience? So would people agree? Yeah. So I suppose that's what's different between maybe club dancing. You know, we can have club dances on stage. And people argue that once they crossed that barrier, they become theatrical, or they've been theatricalized or theatrically presented. But if you're in a club, dancing with someone, maybe social, participatory people might describe it as that. Anything else you think defines theatrical dance?

**Audience**

I think just dance on stage with theatrical lighting and with audiences, so it's present.

**'Funmi Adewole**

Would you define it by types of dance? Would you say some dance techniques are more theatrical than others? Like ballet, some developed to be presented. What about choreography? Any definition?

**Audience**

I think it doesn't need to be performed in a theatre or even in an outside environment. It can be anywhere.

**'Funmi Adewole**

Oh, yeah. Choreography can take place in other places besides the theatre? So, it's an activity. So, what is choreography? Wherever it takes place?

**Audience**

Well, it literally means to write. To write. Yeah. So, it's about also fixate, fixing, fixing something. And normally has a beginning and an end, like a theatrical dance. It's not like a social event.

**'Funmi Adewole (15 minutes)**

Yeah, I think that's important. You just think about fixing and it is about a sort of perspective as well. Don't you think so when you fix something, you decide how you're going to fix it. I mean, I could fix it this, I do this because I think this side of my face is my best profile. So, I could, you know, fix it that way. Or I might decide, I want to give you that view, because this is my intelligent walk. You know, there's different ways if I want to sort of, I don't know, you know, there's, there's a way I can sort of fix how I present myself that you get a particular perspective of me. No pun intended anyway. So yeah, theatrical dance, choreography. We talked about professional what some people might call professional performance forms, certain techniques. We talked about the stage we talked about spectatorship we talked about the art of writing dance we talked about choreography happened in many places, which means the ideas behind choreography and organisation don't only appear in dance. So, I thought it will be important to talk about that. Before we go to border thinking. Now border thinking is an idea that came out by this gentleman called Mignolo. His first name is Walter, by the way and I forgot to put the year so I'll try and ferret that out later. And he did ascribe border thinking as the decolonization and transformation of the rigidity of epistemic and territorial frontiers established and controlled by the coloniality of power in the process of building the modern colonial world. Now, that's lots of long words. But basically what he's saying is border thinking is a way of creating other ways of thinking about anything that is not Eurocentric, because when he's talking about colonialization, in this sense, he is talking about thinking about things from a European perspective. And if you look at the border, it's the border between places, and in the case of theatre, we're talking about the border between ideas, and histories. When I think of theatrical dance, I think of modernity, the modern world, but modernity, like some people argue, we should say modernities because modernity reads differently to different people. Now coming from a country like mine, Nigeria, where it is they say, three

main ethnic groups, but some people argue that there's 200, if you want to talk about languages. Yeah. So we bring in this idea called theatrical dance. It was promoted very strongly at the time of independence, when Britain stopped ruling Nigeria, and a number of countries in Africa launched national dance companies, theatre companies, and these theatre companies were to present traditional dances. And not many countries wrote about this phenomenon. But one country that did was Ghana, and in Ghana they talked about this presentation of traditional dances on stage as a modern dance event. And Mawere Opoku was the first Artistic Director of the National Dance Ensemble of Ghana. And one of his mentees came to Britain and started a company called Adzido Pan African dance ensemble. And so Adzido came out of a modern dance movement. And I'm going to show you some footage of Adzido, because I know that some people in this room remember it, but most of you probably don't. Is this your idea of modern dance? Why is this modern dance?

### **Audience**

Because they are defining it in relation to their understanding of traditional dance and the understanding of what is modernity as well. So they consider it modern.

### **'Funmi Adewole**

Yeah, very good answer. They're defining it from their understanding of modernity. Now, for me, a national dance company puts on stage all these traditional dances, and I go and see a production and there's 10 traditional dances in this production. And in this production, these 10 traditional dancers come from 10 different ethnic groups, and I see a Yoruba dance, next to a Hausa dance, next to a dance from the Bachama, next to a dance from the Igbo person from the Igbo culture. In one place, can this ever happen? Other than in the theatre? No. When we used to watch Adzido here, you have Senegalese dances right next to Nigerian dances next to Ghanaian dancers, all in this mythical African village, this one African village on stage that has a whole continent packed into it. But that's modern, because there is no way I would see a trance dance on the Hausa land, except I see in the theatre. And there is no way that anyone will have the gall to touch a trance dancer the Hausa people except in the theatre, because it was legitimized to use dancers in this way from a government level. That's what modernity could do. Modernity could mean that I could be in my village somewhere in Nigeria and a great dancer, and then an arts council person comes along and puts out an audition. And I go from being in that village to being a star dancer in a national company in Lagos. My tradition gives me social mobility. This is modernity. And this kind of modernity was laying value on tradition, but it was modern because of what it did, what conversations it created. It put African dance in a transnational context. However, when the company travelled, and if you look at reviews of the company, there was a great debate is this tradition? Is it modern? Is it reconstruction? What is it? Because it wasn't it was a different idea of modernity wasn't an idea of modernity that came out of the industrial revolution that changed society in such a way that most people were not doing traditional dances in Europe anymore. And everybody went together to you know, dance became professionalised. And then dance created its own language separate from the way people dance socially. This is an idea of modernity that came about from crossing borders. So a family that might perform within a religious ceremony might change the dance in such a way they remove certain sacred items and go and perform it in a theatre and then go back and perform it in the ceremony. So we have a conversation between two sets of institutionalisation within a country, one organised by government and legitimised by government, and one that's working on family levels, within regions and ethnic groups. And then we have the National Theatre in Nigeria, linking with theatres in Europe, linking with tourism, linking with all these other ways of organising and using performance, that's modernity. What this did was change the subjectivity of people. When I watch something like this, I become African, not just Yoruba, and I can see myself on a wider scale. However, when there's a debate about your art form, and you cannot explain what it's doing, the whole thing about cultural politics comes up. What is cultural politics, it is the power to represent yourself and your interests it's the means to get one's work published and displayed. And distributed is the means to define yourself, that means to shape social values. So cultural politics, I would say, the sparring and the arguing in order to be able to define yourself. And if you look at the history of theatrical dance, this goes on all the time, you see different groups of people saying, You know what we're being left out of this conversation that's going on, and we're going to change it, we're going to stop wearing ballet slippers and tie in our hair knots and flitting around in tutus, we're going to start dancing in bare feet, and we're going to turn off the music and we're going to walk in circles, you know, and call that dance. And then people who take an interest, start writing about it, and they start talking about it. And the curriculum changes the media, the media tries to ignore it. So they publish their own magazine, and a social conversation goes on. If you understand how to define yourself, and how to represent your interests, and how to get your work published, you can get into that conversation and into the narrative. And if you don't, you can shout all you like, and it's like, no one hears you. So theatrical dance is very much about being part of a narrative. And that's the way I think about it from where I come from being about the narrative part. Part of that is modernity, and how society is changing, and how people want to represent themselves and their ideas, and how they want to be part of what's going on. And this influences how we organise dance professionally, how we generate histories, histories of institutions. And so it's hugely important for people to be part of

this conversation in the media, you know, to be to be recognised, to impact on curriculum to be able to influence how professionals are organised to be able to represent your identity. And that's why I dance companies might pop up that might represent specific ethnic groups or people in society. I'm going to show you another clip from Irie! Dance Theatre. So what I'm doing now is I'm showing you different videos of, of different choreographers who created work using social or traditional dance forms. And they were trying to influence the narrative and the conversation around dance. But most of the time, how they were trying to represent themselves, or what ideas they were saying, never sort of influenced the discourse, what was being written about dance or what people were saying about dance. Because theatrical dance is very much about ideas. It's almost a visual art, wouldn't you say? When you go on stage and you perform a dance, you're performing for it to be watched. Now, recently, I was reading some articles about the contemporary dance movement in Kenya. And somebody wrote an article, and it was entitled, let us watch dance. No, it was called, shall we watch dance? And that's a big thing. For people who see dance as participatory, shall we watch dance? And that's what the contemporary dance movement that was what showed you as the neo-traditional dance movement, but the contemporary dance movement, we're now looking, presenting dance almost as a visual art and the idea of watching dance, this is new. And so how do you develop a discourse when you don't have a language to speak about what you're doing? And I would say, at this point, the whole idea of African dance aesthetics, that big category I spoke about in the beginning, do you think it's a useful category? This is not a rhetorical question. I know you've been asking lots of rhetorical questions. But this one actually, I would like your perspective, do you think it's useful to have that kind of category? What categories are useful to you as a dancer? Because my guess is that everybody in this room as a dancer,

#### **Audience**

I suppose that there's a sense of similarity between the dance forms, I mean there is reluctance to label something, but the sense of similarity gives you an idea that you can term the similarities with a turn of phrase such as

#### **'Funmi Adewole**

Yeah, yeah, the similarities, has made the category useful because people get a sense that if we're saying African nouns aesthetics, probably the dance will have a low centre of gravity, probably use a flex knee, they're probably you know, a mobile spine probably be a lot of pelvis, use of pelvis, the aesthetics will probably be high low, what they call high, low juxtaposition. So people go from dancing really full out to being very sort of soft. You know, there's, there's some general ideas, but also, some people do not like this category. Because if I put you in a dance class that is based on Sabar, and you have learned Kpanlogo. Kpanlogo is Ghanaian, and I, you know, Kpanlogo very well, and then I say, go and dance Sabar, you will not have a clue on how to approach that movement is completely different. Because Kpanlogo is you're doing something like that and Sabar you're doing something like that. I mean, what skill? Do you understand the skill basis, you know, so vastly different that some people say, this category actually is very generic, and it flattens African dance, and it removes its value? Because, you know, in a sense, it says, we're just one thing. And there's so many dance forms and techniques, or these similarities, similarities in all these dances, but they come together in such different ways. Do you know what I mean? Is it useful in training? I'm doing an African dance course. What do you expect to learn on that African dance? Suppose, if that's the title of the course, could be anything, you know? So, in that case, we will say, is it useful? I mean, as dancers, what categories or labels are useful for you? Techniques? So, if you if there's a class and they say it's it's a Graham technique, but do people do classes like that?

#### **Audience**

I mean you know what you're going to get from ballet and then in contemporary you might get some floorwork. And then the African dance, you've got many different types of dances with maybe what is interesting is the different types. And so I will choose which type of dance I want to go to, because all of them are different.

#### **'Funmi Adewole**

Yeah, I would agree. Although when we're looking at theatre, the way people come through, as theatre performers, a lot of people are learning some of this dance, some of that dance and some of another dance, they hardly ever spend three years learning one dance. And a lot of the time we're learning choreographic practice that has African dance. So, I might take a class with a choreographer who's created phrases and phrases of movement based on several dances. And we might call this a Pan African is dance class. So, you're not learning a specific dance, you're learning a range of skills from several dances. So, what do we call that?

#### **Audience**

For me, it's about identity and about market as well. So, this category, in a way, it makes sense in the West because we want to portray, kind of a big category and also we want to sell it in a way or buy it right? So, it's easier to buy African dance rather than to buy a specific technique? I find this to be understood in terms of market as well and how we like I'm thinking like, because I use specific form of Indian classical dance, I have gone to some school and trying to propose this and they've called me okay, if I put this name people will never come to your class, but if we just say Indian dance, then they will come.

**'Funmi Adewole (30 minutes)**

it's very similar, except some, and then some forms become very famous like Sabar, and you can say Sabar class and people will come because it's become that famous, like you could say Bharatanatyam and people say okay, you know, because it's specific, but it's, it's not enough. It's very true. And this is what I'm saying about theatrical dance. We argue about labels a lot. You know, is it Black dance? Is it African dance? Is it this? Is it that? And I would argue what conversation are we taking part in because that depends on what label we're going to use. When I look at the term African dance aesthetics, I think of a counter discourse. That term counters another discourse. And its function is to counter that discourse and make us open to seeing and recognising and identify another history of dance making, that we've been ignoring. Otherwise, we come to the theatre we sit down, as one I read about one critic came to the theatre. And he watched it Garth Fagan, who's a Caribbean choreographer he choreographed the Lion King, and said, and basically said, it is ballet gone wrong, it's badly performed ballet, because for him, he saw enough pointed feet to say this is a ballet company. But then he was seeing all this other stuff that shouldn't be in ballet. So as far as he was concerned, it was just bad, badly done ballet. But he was ignoring a whole history of performance, which is about the fusion of ballet, with non western form. And he felt, I'm a critic, I can ignore it. Because there's no language to describe what this man is doing, or at least I don't know it. So we create a counter discourse and say, All these dances, Ailey, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Urban Bush Women, all these companies contemporary African dance companies, they have African dance aesthetics, and if you as a critic are going to ignore that label, then you're not worth your title critic. So, then it forces that everybody to try and engage with this topic, African aesthetics and try and understand what it is in it within this discussion about theatrical dance. And then maybe what the choreographer is trying to specifically communicate in their work, they will have a way of saying it, because they composition, their work artistically. And, and that's the thing about art. The artists might not want to talk, but everybody else has to be able to talk about them. So there has to be a discourse. And if you cannot put forward language, which people can talk about, then your discourse is ignored. And people don't just position themselves with language, therefore, they have positioned themselves with the techniques they use. So, I'm going to show a video. And this is by Irie! Dance Company. And it was made in the 80s. I mean, this is showing again, in 1990s. Okay, what do you see? How would you describe that?

**Audience**

I can see also some ballet training.

**'Funmi Adewole**

It's interesting. That's what you say first, but the ballet training, it's contemporary. Contemporary means everything. Yeah. Yeah. I see that. This is for me for shapes, the shapes of the movement, of the angles and the angles. And the Yeah, the curved back. Yeah.

**Audience**

I can see like the traditional form and the traditional relationship to music, in a modern way.

**'Funmi Adewole**

In a modern way.

**Audience**

In a modern context yeah, maybe because of the music. Also, there's also sort of layers of differently training, you can see coming through. I think there is a bit of Graham as well. And I was going to say well, what if this sentence would be performed by a white person? What would they say? What would people say? That's very interesting. If they changed the music maybe it will become more modern

**'Funmi Adewole**

Okay. Interesting.

**Audience**

In my opinion, I think it's more like modern dance, because of the dress, everything in the music. The other issue is how much of African dance is actually in modern dance that we don't recognise? Western modern dance. We forget we think that modern western dance is white, but actually there's a lot of elements that come from African dance.

**'Funmi Adewole**

You've all seen Ailey before? Or seen clips of Ailey? Okay, that's a fusion. Do you know Alvin Ailey Dance Company? That's a fusion of modern dance and Africanist aesthetics. Is this similar at all?

**Audience**

In a way, I think so. But not completely, because I think, Alvin Ailey movement was, there was a narrative, I think clear, as far as I know, his work. But obviously, I don't know much about this, so I cannot see how this particular piece fits into a broader narrative. Looking at Alvin Ailey there are elements of spirituality that are very clear in the body language

**'Funmi Adewole**

I'm also talking about the nature of the fusion. Because we've identified ballet, we've identified modern dance techniques, we're thinking that okay, we changed the music, and maybe we put, you know, some classical or atmospheric sound we might think, just modern dance. We may not even notice that there's anything sort of Africanist about it, you know, she's wearing this dress, blah, blah. But if you were to look at the fusion of Ailey, and this, are they similar in any way? How Ailey has mixed movement?

**Audience**

Yes.

**'Funmi Adewole**

You think so? Shall I try and find some on YouTube?

**Audience**

There was something that I noticed with Ailey, similar to what you were saying about seeing in the performance, a layering of different techniques that they have assimilated into their particular performance. So, I think for me watching Ailey, I'm always very aware of the like a pushed version of a repertoire dancer that they have absorbed all these different styles into something. And there is a company style, but there's this knowledge in the body of an assimilation of these

**Renée Bellamy**

A video is played here.

**'Funmi Adewole**

I don't think it's the same. What do you think? I don't think it's technically the same at all.

**Audience**

I think that piece isn't but I mean, there are pieces in Ailey's repertory that are similar to the one that we watched previously. That one was very Horton made, it was literally nothing but Horton.

**'Funmi Adewole (45 minutes)**

But I would argue, and I don't think we have the time to start flicking through videos. But I would argue that the fusion is not the same. And that's why I'm saying, hybridity how you make a hybrid form, communicates something different. What Beverly was doing is she was taking reggae and it was very specifically 1980s reggae so if you don't know 1980s reggae, you might not appreciate that. She was taking something quite specific. And it's a club form. If you lived in 80s Britain, it was a soundtrack of black people writing against the government because that's what's happened in the 80s. And that was the language of protest, reggae. And what she does here, I can't resist this video is played during this time. But you would agree with me or you might not actually, let me not make assumptions. But when I look at Sinner man, Wade in the Water and all of this, I would say a lot of it is Horton. A lot of it is Horton. You don't get people going (demonstration). Do you understand? Like I saw over there in Beverly's one and we see the modern dance and I would argue that the modern dance, how Beverly uses modern dance, Beverly Glean is that she uses it so that a step that would normally be, you know, something like that, would she be able to the dance will be able to expand it and cross the stage with what would normally be a smooth step. So it's more of a morphing of techniques. It's not a matter of someone's doing a ballet movement, and then puts a ripple in the

middle of the ballet movement. See what I mean? It's like she's used it as an undergirding so that very sort of small social dance movements can be expanded. That kind of when I spoke, when I interviewed her, what she was looking at was the idea of one was British Caribbean-ness. And the idea of how does one's heritage work within a new space. So she's looking at place and space, it's a very different, it's a very different kind of narrative, they're very different kinds of stories she was trying to tell with this, that fusion to this, this, these are negro spirituals. They're telling a completely different story with the music and the way the technique is being formed. Howard, however, if you don't appreciate or know about the kinds of So I would tell you that every step in this, all of these steps that you are saying the modern, they're all reggae. However, because she's all these movements are all against the modern dance technique has been used to phrase it, to create it in a phrase, so it works in space in a particular way. And also, she's also there's something else, that choreography where the dancer will just pose, and she will, she will pose in a particular way, and you won't know whether this will be able to tell whether this step is a modern dance step or reggae dance step. So she's playing with the borders between the dance forms, the similarity and dissimilarity with it, and it's a different way of fusing it's making a different point, as I would say, it's trying to enter is entering into the discourse on theatrical dance from a different point to which he does for example, and so hybridity fusion is not just fusion is how you choose also tells a different story. So, I want to just show one or two more videos, and then we can have some questions or you can ask me questions. I've been asking you questions. It's only fair to get allow you to ask me some questions. Ah, yes. Let's look at something a bit more recent. You know, I, I just want to say one more thing about Adzido. The first, the first National Dance Company of Africa was called Les Ballets Africains. Has anyone seen it? Les Ballets Africains? Which means Les Ballets Africains de Guinée, which means the African Dance Company of Guinea, which is an interesting name, because it's named after the continent, but comes from one country that tells you something about the idea of modernity. When he launched his company in 1958, when it was launched, as the National Dance Company in 1958 existed before that. There was complete uproar, people were saying people were writing Keïta Fodéba, who was the National Dance Company. He has bastardised African dance, see what he has done? We are anthropologists. We've gone out there to villages, and we've seen what traditional dance is and he's put this stuff on stage and he's modernised and commercialised it. And he wrote an article in 1958, called African Dance And The Stage. And it's interesting that 40/50 years later, what was considered as very subversive. You know, at the time in 1950, it was considered sort of subversive, he was putting traditional dance in the place of art dance, and he wrote an article saying, we call this company, that African ballet company because if classical ballet is a representation of all that is good in the West, our dancers are equal to ballet boom, and it was a big Ferrari. But then the conversation has changed over time, and no one would ever think, when you see traditional dancers you say, oh, isn't that cute? Isn't that lovely? Oh, isn't it nice that that was radical at some point. So, that's why I'm also saying that when the conversation changes, artists change, because they realise that this, this form is not making the impact it used to, let's try another way of entering into this kind of discourse, and being part of the cultural politics. So, I'm going to show a YouTube clip of a performance called This Is Not Black is by Alexandra Sutton. And it was performed, it's been performed several times. He's been touring it for a number of years, but it was I think, at Sadler's Wells Wildcard a few years back. I was the dramaturg for this. And this is the pitch she did after she saw me sort of fall flat on my face at East London Dance. Okay, from the little you saw? How would you describe the movement in that piece? Did it have that sort of modernist aesthetic that you saw in Beverly Glean's piece? The previous one? No, no, not from that part at all. Yeah. And most of the piece, when you see the movement, you can almost locate it, you can say, that number or that you can almost look at the piece, the dance piece, and almost say, Yeah, I know what dance form it is. She uses many dance forms, but the way she uses them, you can, in many respects, identify them. However, there is no argument as to this being a contemporary dance piece, partially because this is 20 years on from when Beverly performed made her piece because in the 80s, what was going on in Britain, I think London contemporary was, I think it had just been closed down in around 1994, you know, so the idea is that modern dance was Graham or Cunningham and it was very, that idea was still hanging around, and postmodern dance was just coming in. So, the idea of modern was really attached to the type of technique you're using much more strongly than now where it's really more about your choreographic approach. I think you don't have to agree with me, you can say no, but that's what I think. But there's no argument, no one came to this piece and left and said, this was not contemporary dance. One thing she did, she did a number use a number of compositional methods. But one thing she did is she worked with this idea of playfulness. So, she was continually playing with the audience. You know, she, she stopped at one point and starts putting posters on her head, and says she, you know, she puts one and says, God, she goes, am I male? Am I you know, the audience? Answer back, she puts one thing Beyonce, as you saw there, and she changes characters, she starts off dancing as a club girl. And later on, she turns into a politician, and she's constantly playing. And with this concept and this approach of playfulness, you know, it engages the audience, and they understand what she's doing. Not necessarily the dancer she's doing, but she understands what she's communicating. Because the border by which she is getting people to think next to is this idea of playfulness. And across that border, people can communicate. If she came out and did series of different dances, one after the other people in the audience will either say, oh, she's showcasing dances or there's some deep tradition happening

here. We don't really understand what she's doing, or is this the original dance? This is your authentic dance. This is not, you know, all of those questions will be answered. But no one really asked us questions. I looked at reviews, I spoke to people, no one's asked that. They get what she's saying. But that's because of the way she's positioned as the window she's given a window through which she communicates. And that's a choreographic choice. The way she has written the piece. But again, it will also bring up the questions of this is definitely African and these are definitely African forms. And this is a contemporary expression. That's not European. So, there's another story to go and follow if you're interested. The last piece, do we have time?

### **Audience**

Can I just ask some thing? In a way I find that the reason why this is not considered traditional is because she is working with the concept and then you're working with a concept is so important for contemporary contemporary practice, right? Whereas in the 80s it seems to me that the emphasis was more on you are a contemporary dancer because you call a particular technique. Yeah. Now is you say the emphases on choreographic? So, I guess what I want to say is that actually, I found that she is meeting practice within the environment nowadays. So, her practice looks contemporary, because it is actually complying with ideas of what is contemporary nowadays. If it makes any sense?

### **'Funmi Adewole**

I would agree and disagree. If you want to be part of a conversation, there's no point me sitting here and speaking in Aruba, you will not get what I'm saying, I will not communicate anything, the only way I can communicate with you, is if I speak English, I can speak English. And I can throw in a lot of African proverb so you understand I'm coming from somewhere else. And if I want you to understand that I have a different worldview to you, and a different philosophy to you, then I might choose my English words in a way. And this I'm talking about what African writers do, they do this as well as, as Asian writers do, as well, as Latin American writers do as well. They refer to other histories and other ways of using the language. So they use the English language, but in a way that you know that this is not how an English person would phrase this and that's what she's doing. She's provided a window by which is a contemporary practice, conceptual, she did. And Beverly did in the 80s, she did the same thing. She took modern dance, the phrasing, if you look at it, she uses motifs and variations, how you would normally put together a modern dance at that time, she used reggae, but the discussion at the time, no one really noticed that if you read all the reviews, I actually wrote an article on the reviews of her work. They could not understand, you know, most people just felt you know, she should decide to be traditional, she should decide to be model, because they didn't understand that kind of mix. At that time if you wanted to be traditional, you did what Adzido did. And if you want it to be modern, you did what Ailey did or Dance Theatre of Harlem and there was nothing in between. And that's why somebody like her at the time her work was I would say was underrated. Do you see what I mean? So, it is possible to, because you're not trying to exclude yourself from the conversation? I think I find the word compliance, I have a question about the word compliance because it gives the idea of the person has just given into something, you want to be part of the conversation, but you want to be part of it on your terms, and you want to be able to communicate what you want to communicate.

### **Audience**

Yeah. Would you then say that it's the understanding of the principles that made that happen kind of like the 80s and the understanding of the principle of African dance, and the principle of contemporary dance now. It's what's changing that mindset of the people

### **'Funmi Adewole**

I think, the term contemporary dance, when I when I look at the 80s, I think contemporary dance was considered very much a Euro-American practice. Now it's considered quite transnational. And I don't think people have a Pacific expectation that contemporary dance has to be you know, now, that is because so many things have changed over time that you've had a postmodern dance movement, you know, where European choreograph is refusing to constantly say, we don't want to just go on stage and perform specific techniques. You know, people started deconstructing those techniques, and people started creating different types of choreograph. So that was happening. And then you know, you had companies coming out, you had Butoh, for example, contemporary dance form from Japan, which didn't go by any idea of technique, or any of the Western styles or techniques. So there's lots of things I've actually shifted the way people look at contemporary dance, when you go to a dance festival, you expect to see dance, contemporary dance from around the world, and you see various, you know, different ways. So it's now open. Contemporary Dance has become a much more open field to and people aren't expecting different influences, and they're looking more maybe for a concept to understand what they're watching. Whereas at the time, when Beverly started, Irie! people understood contemporary much more from whether you were working in a

specific dance technique and a dance technique made for stage and that's why Germaine Acogny's intervention when she created the Acogny technique was to say, you can make a stage technique from African forms. So what I'm saying here is that there are conversations and debates, when you look at practices of artists, they are reacting to what's going on in a political at the political time, in the way they compose their work, you know, in the way the composer work and their choice of techniques and the choice of compositions in order to be able to communicate in order to be able to defend themselves in order to be able to be part of the conversation or change the conversation. I'll show one last piece. And I'll just talk briefly about another one because I can't find the video on it. This is, I think, a piece made by Sharon Ray, I could not, it's on VHS, and I could not find it. So, I sat down, I just filmed a screen. So that's why it looks weird. I think this was made in is called Broad Hands and Bare Feet. And this is the Ballroom floor in the South Bank. And Sharon, at this time was looking at jazz dance in a contemporary dance context. And if you know, at this period of time, jazz dance was considered to be entertainment dance. So, what she was doing here was bringing jazz elements into contemporary. And the way she sets up on the ballroom floors, almost reminiscent of a jazz cafe because the pianist is on stage people are in the round. And what I found interesting watching the video is that people would clap for the musicians as well as for the dancers. So, the audience bought into that environment and reacted the piece in the same way. And in her choreography, what she's doing is she's playing very much polyrhythm, but she specialises it. So, you have the dancers dancing are different lines of music. Do you have any comments on the piece of what you see this is I think this was 98. I'm not positive I can't remember, but I think this was soon after she left rambert. She was a principal dancer, and then she made this. The last piece I want to talk about this. I can't find any footage. It's a new piece and it's by Asha Thomas and Yinka Esi Graves. Yinka Esi Graves is of Caribbean and Ghanaian heritage, and she's a flamenco dancer, and Asha Thomas is a former Ailey dancer. And they did a piece called CLAY, which has taught before but it was performed at Dance Umbrella recently, very recently, as part of out of the system, which, which was part of out of the system at Rich Mix, and I was the dramaturg for this iteration of the performance. And both dancers have very, very different backgrounds as I say, Yinka is a flamenco dancer and Asha is a contemporary dancer, who has done some flamenco as well. They brought all their performance experience to this piece. And it was it's quite magical, they also had the Flamenco guitarist. And again, it was the idea of the concept that enabled the piece to work because they worked very much on interaction. So what the audience was watching was their interaction. If they had tried to build a piece around the dance forms, I don't know if people would know where to look, you know, in terms of the amount of information that was being thrown at them, but people were actually watching their relationships and how they bounced off each other. So again, another way that dramaturgically how people are bringing African forms or forms with African aesthetics, not necessarily African into the theatre space and communicate is finding these compositional methods. And that's because, theatre holds a some people will say unjust unjustly holds this important place within society. But it is the place where, I will say it's the place of modernity but it's not defined by ethnicity is not defined is part of the modern state and the modern state is supposed to be about constitution and is supposed to be open to everyone. And if you want to be part of that conversation, and part of how we define society, you want to be in theatre. And then that's all I have to say about border thinking and African dance aesthetics. What do we think about when we see different places and different cultures together in the theatre space? Thank you for listening.

*(Outro: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021)*

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