

ON AIR regularly invites external experts to reflect on aspects of the AIR programme. Igor Dobricic was reunited with Germaine Acogny who has greatly influenced him.

Wordless

In 2003, as a part of my DasArts studies, I spent ten weeks at the Ecole des Sables, the dance platform and school that Germaine Acogny and her partner Helmut Vogt were setting up in Toubab Dialaw, a small fishing village on the Atlantic coast of Senegal. I was one of the eleven students that embarked on a journey that was to be a life-changing experience for some of us.

Many factors contributed to the intensity of the period that we spent in Senegal. It was a momentous encounter with the African continent in all its glory – and all its misery. Then there was the timing, with the invasion of Iraq taking place just a few weeks after our arrival in Toubab. But what gave real depth and importance to the experience was not the political, cultural or even natural extremes, but the presence and involvement of one particular person.

I distinctly remember our first working encounter with Germaine. Using very few words, she instructed us to imitate whatever she did as accurately as possible. Rather than elaborate explanations, she gave us her movement – direct, and unmediated by language. In return, she expected pure mimesis and absolute trust. So, there we were, atop a sandy hill overlooking the immense, dry landscape, under a huge open tent, imitating every movement made by a tall, beautiful African woman of indefinite age whom we barely knew. Dancing to the accompaniment of a battery of live drums, her movements were unpredictable, complex and hybrid. Without interruption, she shifted style, direction, orientation, speed and limbs with playful delight. From time to time, the mood would shift and joy would be overshadowed by sadness, sadness would morph into almost religious solemnity, only to slide back into light-hearted irreverence and childlike playfulness. We were mostly incapable of capturing the details of her gestural propositions and respond in kind to her unstoppable, proliferating, continuously changing movement. Yet still she transported us all forward from one moment to the next for almost an hour.

Sometime in the middle of that first morning session with Germaine at the Ecole des Sables, I came to understand the true meaning of 'direct transmission of knowledge'. I also realised – in a flash – why we in the West are incapable of experiencing it: we are scared of mimesis. We have forgotten how to trust and to follow the movement of another body. We do not come together in the moment. So what Germaine Acogny used all her charisma and wisdom to demonstrate to us on that first morning, was the power the physical body has to inform and instruct another body, beyond spoken language.

In 2010, I was fortunate enough to meet up with Germaine again during one of her visits to Amsterdam as AIR at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. And once again I found that, eloquent as she is, it was her physical presence and communication that left the deepest impression.

This encounter with Germaine, just like our first, involved two animated bodies communicating despite and beyond verbal language. For a short while, we resolved cultural and personal differences and avoided possible misunderstandings because we were producing our own temporary shared culture, an interplay of movements, postures and gestures. The benevolent sensuality of the encounter became its medium of transmission. We communicated by imitating and responding. The words we spoke existed as sounds and rhythms before they became containers of meaning. Mimesis cannot be put into words if the words are not spoken and heard – if they are not performed by vibrating the air.

Essence and mystery abound in Toubab Dialaw. They are profoundly, playfully omnipresent. There, they are real and incontrovertible simply because they are the immediate conditions of embodiment. Germaine Acogny carries this spirit with her. She reminds me that what matters is physical encounter and its unfolding over time, rather than the web of signification it leaves in its wake; it is the perceptible movements of the sun and the moon that matter, not the astronomical calculations of their orbits. She taught me about the body's ability to transcend verbal language and inform and instruct another body.

One might view Germaine Acogny's presence/work/technique as a unique example of embodied intercultural practice, to the extent that to inform is to recognise differences – whether cultural or personal – and that to instruct is to assist in overcoming them. But this characterisation drags it back into the realm of ideological discourse, where it is instrumentalised for some imagined future social benefit. I would like to believe that what she is proposing and offering can create benefit only in the moment of doing for those who are doing it; what is being transmitted cannot be transmitted by explanation. Perhaps the only thing that can be articulated clearly in words is the deceptively simple lesson that the one true basis of all dance is the immediate and vital coexistence of moving bodies in the same timespace.

This lesson is so fundamental, so blatantly obvious, that perhaps we have no need to learn it. In this spirit, I feel that what we need is the presence of the one who speaks, rather than the content of what is spoken. We need the teacher, not the teachings. To me, Germaine Acogny is precisely that: the wordless teacher of the most evident wisdom of movement.

Igor Dobricic is a dramaturge and theatre maker. He works with various choreographers and teaches at the School for New Dance Development. He was recently a mentor at DasArts.