

Funmi Adewole first visited de Theaterschool in Amsterdam in 2007 at the invitation of Nita Liem, who was AIR at the time. Since then she has returned to the school several times to develop new perspectives for intercultural dance education. Here, she offers her reflections on the situation in the school.

Finding the multiple body

By Funmi Adewole Kruczkowska

The school is a stimulating, evolving context. On visiting the AHK to work in 2011, I was delighted to discover a school that I felt to be very different from when I last taught there in 2007. In the intervening period, the school had hosted two AIRs, Nita Liem and Germaine Acogny, whose respective theatre and dance practices are intercultural. The success of these residencies inspired the setting up of a new intervention in the curriculum: The Multiple Body module, a space for the faculty, the students and visiting artists to reflect on de Theaterschool's ongoing investigation into transcultural dance practices.

As a concept, 'The Multiple Body' emerges partly from the discourses on social cohesion that bring together ideas from transculturalism, interculturalism, and multiculturalism. The school has chosen to take a transculturalist approach. Unlike multiculturalism which can promote allegiances to past heritage by placing value on distinct cultures, transculturalism draws our focus to the present need for dialogue and exchange. Interculturalist and transculturalist approaches both promote dialogue and exchange between cultures, and I feel the subtle distinction between them lies in their respective emphasis on process and outcome: interculturalism emphasises the method and means by which dialogue is enabled between the participating cultures, while transculturalism emphasises the breaking down of boundaries between cultures to produce a new common culture.

Imagining the multiple body

I imagine The Multiple Body to be one that can transcend, confound or confront limitations imposed by sociocultural realities or the gaze and perception of others. I imagine it to be a body – whether trained in a specific dance style or in an eclectic mix of dance styles – that can hold dialogues through dance. It is an intuitive body that loves dance and will find out how dance operates in a multiplicity of contexts – the social sphere, the theatre, the school – and understands how each dance form embodies aesthetics that represent philosophical and cultural values, making them pow-

erful tools for communication, transformation and creating space. In short, it is a body that can 'do things' with dance. In view of this I envisage the Multiple Body module as a natural context in which to carry out dance projects rather than to take a traditional dance class, and a place for engaging with the dancing body's role in society.

The multiple body in practice

Whilst teaching my course at de Theaterschool I realised that some of my tasks were not making any sense to the students. It was then that I enquired into the nature of the curriculum and was surprised to discover that it was not style based. This means the students do not have main dance style, such as modern dance, which they have thoroughly mastered and into which they can assimilate aspects of other styles. The curriculum could thus be described as transcultural; the students are exposed to a range of dance forms and styles, and they receive training to become reflective, creative and analytical. Each student effectively devises his or her own dance vocabulary and choreographic practice.

The failure of the workshop was an instructive and humbling reminder that in cross-cultural encounters one must be fully acquainted with the context and perspectives that are informing the various participants' approaches to the activity. This experience did, however, bring home the usefulness of understanding the principles of working in and across different genres or styles. In social contexts, people generally learn to dance through learning a specific style, whether this be Salsa or House. The eclectic training of the students at de Theaterschool means they are opened up to explore these encounters in different ways aesthetically and structurally and to create new processes and forms.

This opens up another potential area for investigation as part of the Multiple Body module: the relationship between structure and dance style. Dance artists working in intercultural ways tend to have a style-based approach. They create

wider frames of reference for participants and audiences by mixing dance styles, because each dance style represents a culture, population group and/or value system. Some dance makers expand the framework of one dance form to incorporate elements of others, while others apply the rules of one dance form to another. Still others create a new framework into which they draw elements from a variety of dances. Working with frameworks can be political, with the potential to trigger discussions around representation and its ethics.

The Multiple Body module could also be a place for students to work with a choreographer to investigate his or her relationship with community, theatre and education. Additionally, they could explore scenarios that might transpire during their professional careers and answer a variety of questions: in what form does marginalisation or social exclusion show up in classrooms or community settings? How might dance bridging gaps and broadening horizons? How might we facilitate the emergence of new identities and foster self-expression?

Transcultural challenges

One of the challenges facing teachers at de Theaterschool is how to incorporate the ideas from the residencies into their practice. Teachers are generally involved in researching transculturalism primarily in relation to their own dance practice; at present, there is little opportunity for them to share ideas and develop a 'faculty-wide' perspective. For the students, the challenge is to ensure that they do not lose touch with the reason they are training in a non-style based curriculum and end up seeing their practice as simply another style.

Transcultural AIR legacy

Nita Liem's and Germaine Acogny's work provides a model of how engagement with a specific social context can inspire an expanded vision. Nita Liem has a palpable engagement with Amsterdam as a culturally diverse metropolis, and many of her dancers come straight from the city's clubs. Her productions feature journeys in which the dancers tell their stories through encounters with each other and the audience. Germaine Acogny's technique bears witness to Africa's emergence from colonisation. She has brought the qualities of African dance from the village to the city and onto the international stage. Drawing on modern and ballet structures and African dance movements, she has created a technique that focuses attention on the aesthetics of African dance forms creating a technique that transcends institutional contexts.

As an outside observer, I believe that the legacies of Nita Liem's and Germaine Acogny's residencies will most likely be found in broad concepts in their practice. One aspect of Nita Liem's work, for example, centres on how dancers connect with each other through rhythm. And Germaine Acogny's technique is famous for its focus on the use of the spine. These two principles could form the basis of a variety of practical research projects.

The future of The Multiple Body

It seems likely that The Multiple Body module will place transcultural practice centre stage and encourage expansion through encounters with other approaches. This will demand new ways of seeing and working but it is just the kind of intervention needed in these challenging times – times that demand we re-examine the interface between society and artistic practice.

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From top: Funmi Adewole Kruczkowska, Nita Liem, Germaine Acogny