



**RODNEY DIVERLUS**

## **Radicalizing Dance** Confessions of an “artist”

*There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. ~ Audre Lorde*

**M**y name is Rodney Diverlus. I am a dancer. I am an activist. I am an actor. I am a performance artist. I am black. I am poor. I am young. I am a student. I am Haitian. I am Caribbean. I am an immigrant. I believe in dreams. I believe that if you are a good person, who does good things, the universe can still mess with you. I believe that family is relative and is what you make of it. I believe that education, at all levels, is a fundamental right. I believe that the single greatest thing you can do for a child is introduce them to dance. I believe that there would be less hate in the world if everyone danced more. I believe that dance has saved my life.

Born in pre-coup d'état Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, and raised in Bush-led Southern U.S., dance was not something I had regular access to. Growing up in a working class immigrant family, I did not have the privilege of attending the ballet, could not afford theatre or dance camp, was not able to participate in after-school arts programs, and was not able to afford the drop-in community classes. In fact, for the majority of my childhood, I was not exposed to theatre and dance education. This was also before mainstream dance shows like *So You*



The author.

*Think You Can Dance* or *Dancing With the Stars*. My only pop culture exposure to dance was in 90s dance movies. My elementary school was primarily composed of low-income Black, Latino, and immigrant students, so as such, our arts program was relegated to basic music and visual art. The tides changed in grade 8 when one of my teachers started a drama club and directed the school's first play. I was finally able to get on stage.

The year was 2002, the play was Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and I was cast as the Mad Hatter. In contrast to other extracurricular activities that were offered at my Middle School, there were no costs associated with this project. There were none of the extra add-on fees to the club that we now see again and again for extracurricular or community arts programs (material, costume, traveling, and other miscellaneous fees). We rehearsed during lunch and a bit after school, which meant that I could participate and could still make the last bus home (as with many small/medium size cities in the States, so much is downloaded onto the individual family unit; as such, public services like transportation were barely funded. The last public bus left my school's neighborhood at 5pm. With the final bell of last period ringing at 3:50pm, I had just over an hour to rehearse all my scenes. A quick look through my hometown's transit website today proves disappointing — over a decade later, the bus routes have only expanded by an hour and a half. But I digress).

Recognizing this now as a form of what I am going to refer as Performance Equity (à la Employment Equity), the ability to partake in free and accessible performance-based education at that age meant that I was able to benefit from the right forms of mentorship and educational infrastructure needed to nurture my raw and untamed desire to perform. Before *Alice*, I had no theatre, dance, or performance training/education. Unbeknownst to the directing teacher, that role has played a pivotal role in shaping, defining, and changing my life.

Looking back, the whole experience is a grainy blur. I had no idea what I was doing, but I distinctly remember writing down everything my drama teacher taught us, from the difference between stage right and stage left, to tips on projecting, to line memorization techniques, and basic theatre etiquette. The audience was comprised of parents and supporters, so we received standing ovations every time we performed. For any child that has any doubts about themselves as

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

wholesome human beings worthy of love, respect, and fullness, thunderous applause, forced laughter, and standing ovations are the best gifts you can ever provide to them.

After *Alice*, I became hungry. I wanted more time on stage and fell in love with performing. I searched for every free performance opportunity in my city, applied for every scholarship that existed, and started working part-time at the public library to afford weekend and summer drama programs. Most of the times I kept the details away from my parents, because with the newly found realities of racism, xenophobia, and classism associated with being new immigrants in the labour market, they felt compelled to apply pressure on my sisters and I to focus on academics in hopes of one day gaining a piece of the lofty American dream (for the musical theatre geeks out there, that was a reference to Miss Saigon's "American Dream"). To them, I was doing extracurricular clubs, and that was that.

Soon after performing in plays, I found myself experimenting with musical theatre, and from there, dance classes. As with many studio dancers, I started off with the rudimentary ballet, jazz, and tap, but quickly grew bored of the classics. I became much more interested in contemporary, hip hop, jazz funk, and lyrical, among others. Whenever we were allowed to dance free form and ignore technique, even better. I danced, acted, and sung my way through high school, and when it became time to make the decision about post-secondary, I considered the conventional Poli-Sci and/or business route. After I received my acceptance into Ryerson's Performance Dance program though, I knew this was the program for me. I accepted the offer and have never looked back.

### **It starts with childhood**

I write this autobiographical-esque introduction not just as a means of 'inspiration' or to tell young poor black kids out there to 'try harder' and 'persevere.' This is not meant to be a self-indulgent manifesto that aims to instill 'hope' in what one would consider to be hopeless situations. Although hope and perseverance are ideal qualities to embody, they are not always the reality. Quite frankly, my background, experience, and identity are not that of many of my colleagues. I am the exception to the rule. The one that snuck through the cracks. And although there



**Rodney solo.**

are individual exceptions, like myself, who happened to be at the right school, at the right time, with the right teachers, today's arts education system as a whole has many flaws and excludes countless young people who have raw talent, drive, but have not been told — nor given the opportunity — to dream. The reality is that in this current societal mindset towards arts education and policy, the majority of young folks are not exposed, are often dissuaded, and are not provided the adequate support structures to be nurtured, embraced, and given the space to grow artistically.

If it were not for the incredible teachers and mentors that I encountered, like my grade 6-8 art teacher Ms. Goetz of Gulfview Middle School (Naples, FL), or my grade 10-12 drama teacher/director/mentor Ms. Fletcher of Westdale Secondary School (Hamilton, ON), I am not sure if I would still be performing. Of course there are always exceptions, and this is not meant to undermine and overlook the incredible work that is being done at the community level to increase access and visibility of certain communities in the arts. But without transformative societal and systemic changes, these will continue to be exceptions to the rule. There can only be so many exceptions, and

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

as an artist and an activist — an activist — I am more interested in how we can fundamentally and permanently change and dismantle the rule itself. What fuels my activism is that broader purpose.

There are many well-meaning activists who do great work serving underprivileged and marginalized communities, but to me the marginality of those communities seem to only grow, not diminish. There are too many young people from these communities, and not enough of us on the other side to make the individual changes that are so desperately needed. With those restrictions in mind, it is time that we start chipping away at the system that has created this very situation. It is time to radicalize our dance education, and broader attitudes and policies about the arts.

Analyzing mainstream dance education will be my primary starting point to discussing inclusion and access. When I use dance education, I am referring broadly to a nuanced and complex education system that includes independently-owned dance studios for children aged three to 18, arts programs in primary/secondary schools, post-secondary performance programs, internships, co-ops, artistic mentorship, as well as the knowledge that is interpreted through dance and theatre performances. As such, if you have ever taken a dance class, are majoring in dance, or have watched/witnessed dancing, you have been exposed to dance education at some form or another. If you have ever watched someone dance a particular way at a club/bar and consciously or subconsciously have taken some of their moves for your own repertoire, you have been exposed to dance education. Dance is imbedded implicitly and subtly within all aspects of culture and we are all actively receiving and transmitting information to each other about movement and dance. From subtle communication cues to full on dance performance, we are constantly absorbing movement qualities. The process of radicalizing dance education starts with acknowledging the ways that we negotiate our personal relationship with dance, the ways that we teach and learn from dance, and changes that need to be made for broader equity and inclusion.

## De-(re-)constructing dance education: what are we even teaching our children?

When discussing the politicization and radicalization of dance, it is important to frame it not only as a form of art education, but also as a site of community-building, resistance and resilience. Conceptually speaking, the reconstruction of dance requires a fair amount of deconstruction. As dancers, performers, and dance patrons/appreciators, a historical perspective helps to gain a deeper understanding of the 'why'. Why is dance important? Why is dance education crucial to society's well-being? Why do we dance? Why is dancing still a dominant form of communication?

When teaching a 10-year-old ballet, hip hop, or jazz, are we just telling them how to get from point A to point B, or are we teaching them an artistic medium that has survived centuries of evolution, fusion, and that was created out of a need? In my primary dance education, I was never exposed to that deeper analysis of the craft that I was perfecting. There was no analysis of how jazz emerged out of the



**"Oh Bondye, Poukisa"** (translated from Creole to "Oh God, Why?"), choreographed by Rodney Diverlus, paints the story of a group of women affected by the Haitian earthquake.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES



**"From Gaza, With Love", choreographed by Rodney Diverlus, about the experiences of women in war-torn Gaza & the West Bank.**

West African and South American slave experience infused within the emergence of North American culture. No analysis of the importance of dance to a plurality religious rituals and worship. No analysis of the ways that dance was used to resist colonization and occupation, particularly in South American and Caribbean communities. No analysis of how ballet was used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reinforce a particular class structure, and still continues to do so. No analysis of the role that dancers and artists placed in global revolutions and acts of resistance. Nor of Indigenous influence of dance forms globally, and Indigenous erasure in dance forms locally. In my own experience, I am still actively trying to access this knowledge base as a means of unlearning and relearning my understanding of the life that I embody.

This is in no means meant to discredit the amazing dance teachers and mentors that I have had, because for many, this information is not readily available. A quick browse through the City of Toronto reference library and it is obvious that there really isn't a lot of accessible and comprehensive research of dance history, origins, cultural implications, etc. (Not as much as other trades and cultural phenomenon anyway.)



An architect does not teach his or her students how to design without first providing the necessary background and history, and yet many of us dancers aren't exposed to the ways our movements have evolved and contributed to history.

I propose a radical approach to dance education, where students are actually exposed to the meaning, history, and full background behind the styles. The importance of 'how' and 'why' need to be analyzed at all levels of education, from tiny tots ballet to adult jazz drop-ins. Teaching a stomp class to a group of 13-year-olds hold no meaning if the history of stomp in Black American subcultures is not fleshed out and explained. Bollywood, without the deep understanding of its role in shaping Indian and South Asian culture and identity is just a series of movements. We are doing a disservice to dance students and to the dance community by stripping it of its complex and nuanced history and reducing it to a series of coordinated steps and movements. And often, omitting context leads to ignorance of the complex.

### **Dance as a reproduction of oppression**

Artists are often looked on to be the decipherers of the human experience, the storytellers, and as people who have historically faced persecution and pain, the litmus point of empathy who work to create a fairer world. But in our attempts at fulfilling these roles, we are not immune to perpetuating the very forms oppression that angers us all. We often recreate spaces that reinforce elitism, classism, heterosexism, patriarchy, racism, ableism, fatphobia, cissexism, trauma, violence, cultural appropriation, erasure, and others. Our work does not exist in vacuums, and as such, when discussing "society's problems", we have to look and challenge the ways we can clean up our own spaces. Those spaces are created often because of a fundamental gap in the formal and informal dance education that we receive, We learn how to do movements, but rarely ask why and how this has an impact on people's lives and our broader communities. Approaching this issue from an intersectional approach means that it is important to consider issues of class, gender, race, ability, sexuality, artistic freedom, and community-building. Approaching this issue also means breaking down and dismantling widely-accepted discourses of dance, that are, to be frank, illegitimate at best, and dangerous at worst.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

### *A discourse of 'masculine' and 'feminine'*

Although widely overrepresented in the composition of dance companies, collectives, and organizations, queer-identified performers (my queer umbrella includes but is not limited to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Transexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirit, Asexual, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Variant, Gender-Queer, Femme, Butch, Drag, Dyke, Pansexual, and others) are vastly underrepresented within the work that are produced. Choreographers often create heteronormative binaries that dancers must adhere to. You are either a 'man' or a 'woman', and you must dance as such. Many of us male dancers are often pressured to 'bulk up' and to be more 'masculine', even when a female partner is not involved. Female dancers are often over-sexualized — the vixen — and restricted to being thrown around and handled by their male partners. Dancers that deter even slightly from the binary are considered 'androgynous' and often are cast in the abstract specialty pieces. I was once dancing in a piece in which the choreographer was adamant in stating that we were not human beings, we were simply concepts and thoughts. And yet, the notes for the male dancers



**Fashion Arts Toronto Performance, choreographed by Rodney Diverlus.**

were constantly that we were ‘not masculine enough’, and to ‘dance more like men.’ Many years later, I am still confused. How can dancers give human qualities to non-human subjects?

Shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* further perpetuate this heteronormative and narrow perspective of gender identity and sexuality. For a generation of dancers, this show has either been the impetus to start dancing, or the representation of the kind of dancers they want to be. This show, as well as other primetime dance shows, further recreate the narrow prescriptions of gender. Dancers are partnered up based on their perceived gender and are often critiqued in the ways that they adhere to these conceptions of gender rigidity. Inherent Transphobic and homophobic cultures created by producers and judges alike have stirred up a couple of notable controversies. In season 7, following the elimination of one of the male dancers Billy Bell, the show’s executive producer and senior judge Nigel Lythgoe stated that viewers might have not enjoyed Billy Bell’s “slightly androgynous style.”<sup>2</sup> Any contemporary dancer would agree that Billy is not androgynous, he simply more feminine than Lythgoe would like. Billy Bell was not abstract, or androgynous, or mysterious. He very much fit the SYTYCD mould with his extensions, tricks, and commercial technique. What Nigel really meant was that Billy was not masculine enough for mainstream America. To defend his statement, Lythgoe refuted the claims of homophobia by stating: “It’s an easy label to paste on anybody who strives to have their male dancers be strong and masculine.” That rebuttal in and of itself dug himself a deeper hole and further exposed the many opinions of masculinity and femininity prevalent amongst many producers/choreographers.

That same season, Lythgoe and fellow judges were also called out for homophobic comments during the audition round. The show had their first ‘same-sex’ ballroom couple: Mitchel Kibeland (who identifies as straight) and Misha Belfer. Following their dance (which by the way was quite good), the judges had a chance to comment.

**Nigel Lythgoe:** *I think you’d probably alienate a lot of our audience. We’ve always had the guys dance together on the show, but they’ve never really done it in each other’s arms before. I’m certainly one of those people that really like to see guys be guys and girls be girls on stage. I don’t think I liked it, to be frank.*

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

**Mary Murphy (the 'resident ballroom expert' and permanent judge):** *This is the first time, honestly, for me to see it. I'm confused, because I see that sometimes you're both being the female role and sometimes the male, so, like, and then sometimes you'll do the trick and then he does it too. So it confuses me.*

**Misha (one of the dancers):** *When we switch back and forth, it makes the whole dance a little bit more difficult, since we go back and forth between lead and follow.*

**Mitchel (the other dancer):** *To show the strength of follow and lead.*

**Mary:** *Right. Which I can see. And you guys did lead and follow really well, I have to say. The technique, actually, still needs a lot of work. It was hard for me to even kind of focus on that technique, 'cause I was still just trying to figure out... It would have been easier for me, in other words, if, if one person was playing the female role and one was playing the male role.*

**Nigel:** *Well, I don't think you want to see two guys there and think, "Male female."*

**Sonya Tayeh (considered to be the most 'androgynous' and 'progressive' judge):** *Okay, but what do you do with the feminine qualities of it?*

**Nigel:** *Well, that is what is, that is, that's my hangup.*

**Misha:** *How is that feminine?*

**Sonya:** *I'm saying that in the genre that I've seen, when I see this approach (gesturing), which, I usually see it from the female perspective. Does that make sense?*

**Misha:** *Yes.*

**Sonya:** *That's what I'm looking at — (to Mary) I'm sorry, I keep*

touching you (laughter) — I'm seeing this. (gesturing)

**Nigel:** Same sex judging! (laughter)

**Sonya:** I relate more to it as a female. So I just get confused. You guys are both amazing, and the movement quality, but I was just confused in terms of the, the classical form. That's all.

**Nigel:** Do you know what? I'd like to see you both dancing with a girl.

**Mary:** I would, too.

**Sonya:** Me, too.

**Nigel:** You never know. You might enjoy that! (smirking) Alright, see you later.

Is Nigel just an 'old homophobe' from a generation past, or does he represent something more pervasive? How much different is he than other dance producers/choreographers? These views represent widespread understanding of gender and sexuality in today's dance culture. And even those who would consider themselves progressive and 'out of the box' will actively promote and reproduce these views. More specifically, this form of insidious homophobia is enforced from the day a child steps into the studio and does their first plié. The irony is that the majority of people in our dance communities have friendships with queer identified people, themselves identify as queer, and generally believe in 'equal rights' for queer-identified people. The community as a whole though is still complicit in the perpetuation of homophobia and transphobia. Queer and Trans people's bodies are often battlegrounds and sites of violence and trauma, and artistic spaces are meant to be healing and reclamation spaces, and not the reproduction of such trauma. Radicalizing dance education means allowing performers to bend, reject, and shape ideal gender performances, it means acknowledging that femme and butch are legitimate identities, and it means allowing students and performers to incorporate all aspects of their identities into performance and training.

### **A discourse of 'exotic' and 'urban'**

Sigh.

Discussing the whiteness of dance is often awkward. Really awkward. As it stands, discussing race, racism, and race relations in contemporary Canadian society is already difficult enough, but discussing it in artistic spaces can often be more of a struggle. As artists, we often pride ourselves in having a deeper understanding of humanity and empathy. As such, you can imagine how defensive one gets when they are called out on their racism. I am not speaking about overt forms of racism that are manifested through physical violence or hate crimes, I am talking about the more insidious everyday and passive racism that we all accept as norm. Racialised dancers who are reading this know this feeling all too well. In the ballet/contemporary world, we are often told that we are "too urban" (as if urbanism connotes blackness), and when we are complimented, it is often based on the 'exotic' qualities that we should be exuding. But then of course, every black contemporary dancer has been told by their white peers that they have 'black feet', and dancers with little arch, no matter the ethnicity, are often lumped into that hierarchy (quick background for non-ballet folks: in ballet, high arches are revered. Genetically speaking, there are many reasons why particular ethnicities have particular foot structures, including but not limited to evolution, geographical location, and genetics. And can you guess which type of foot has become the standard esthetic for ballet? Just Google 'ballet feet' and see how long it takes you to get to a black/brown foot on pointe. I gave up after continuous scrolls).

These insidious forms of racism are intrinsically linked to the underrepresentation of racialised, but primarily black, brown, and Indigenous classical and contemporary dancers in major companies. One does not have to be a psychology expert to know what the effects of being singled out in class, or not seeing people who look like you teaching you, in your textbooks, and in anything related to your form of dance might do to a young racialised child's hopes of dancing in any style that is not Hip Hop/Break Dancing.

As I said, this is awkward stuff. The awkwardness is usually exponential as I am often the only racialised person in the studio. I often hear rebuttals of 'reverse racism', or 'being too sensitive', or that 'things

are getting better, look at Misty Copeland! When we talk about passive forms of racism, we acknowledge that most people aren't actively keeping some races out of dance, but it is important to look at all factors that contribute to the problem. Having a select number of racialised dancers in an entire class, program, company, or collective and pointing to them as proof that you are 'diverse' is tokenism and not truly reflective of the society and communities that we live in.

While we are on the subject of race, read this carefully: colourblindness (in relation to casting or choreographing) is a myth. When a dancer closes their eyes and imagines Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, what faces come up? When one imagines Juliet in *Romeo & Juliet*, which races pop up? Often racialised dancers are left to fend for the sultry, hyper masculine, seductive, or just plain shady characters. I recently chatted with a choreographer who has been active in the Toronto contemporary dance community regarding this very issue to get her opinion. As explained by her, choreographers often look at which bodies can move a particular way, or look like a particular kind of dancer, and often they involved ethnicity. She states that certain casting choices involved "who can do what movement best. Often the dancers who are black, or Spanish, or ethnic are not really the ingénue types, but do well as the sultry vixen. The temptress." She finishes with what she would consider a 'positive' stereotype: "after all, they have an ability to move and work their hips." Part of diversifying our industry does mean expanding the ways that we perceive different movement styles, and different ways of appreciating what each different body brings to the works.

Discussing racism in dance means also discussing who has access to freely represent certain races and communities. The self-described attitude of colourblindness is one of the many factors that give dancers and choreographers a false sense of liberty to freely appropriate and take on the dances of racialised and Indigenous people. This is often with no training, understanding, or acknowledgement of the history, context, and meaning of these dance forms. At its most basic form, cultural appropriation is the act of embodying a part of a culture that you not only are not a part of, but doing it in a way that erases the indented meaning and connotation. Susan Scadafi, in *Who Owns Culture, Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, describes it as including "unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely

to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects" (Scadafi, 2005). Common examples include but are not limited to moccasins, Indian bindi, dreadlocks, and of course the newest fashion trend: Aztec print.

Often cultural appropriation takes on the form of economic exploitation; stealing a particular group's culture to make money, with no credit, acknowledgement, or any percentage of sales. I am of the personal politic that if I was ever to take a particular cloth print/pattern that belongs to a community and make money from it, the least I could do is give the community credit and a cut of the sales. It is the best of a worst case scenario. Imagine if you were a pattern maker and someone takes your signature pattern that has defined you and your style for the longest time and starts making money out of them. Would you not sue? What is worse is that these cultural items/symbols are often tied to spirituality, religion, and sacred histories.

One the most harmful aspect of cultural appropriation is often the double standard that exists is that when people, primarily white folks, appropriate something, it is cool and trendy. When someone who authentically embodies the culture wears/does the same thing, they are faced with racism and discrimination. Cultural appropriation gives a member of a privileged community the false permission to dress/eat/embody a culture, without taking on any of the oppression/discrimination/pain. It absolves them of the reality that members from the marginalized group face. African American women from the southern U.S. cannot unlearn or "de-ghettoize" their language when going to job interviews. Indian women who don the bindi do not get to erase it after a one-night performance like Selena Gomez can. These are lived realities of people that are taken out of context, often for entertainment or for the trivial pursuit of being considered 'cultured.'

Of course cultural exchange and sharing has existed in many civilizations before, but it has always been done with consent and permission. Taking on and embodying an aspect of a culture that is not yours, particularly one from communities already in the margins is cultural theft. Plain and simple.

The dance community is not immune to this phenomenon, we often help to further perpetuate it. Whether it is Bollywood, "African" dance, belly dancing, or stomp, studios, schools, and companies



are often guilty of cultural theft. I recently watched a krump dance performance that left me quite upset. It was partially the almost all-white cast of performers and partially the choreographer who had no lived experience in communities where stomp was prevalent. Krump is a style that has developed out of the streets, out of impoverished black and Latino young folks. It represents the anger and raw emotions of being encapsulated in a class war in 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century America. It became an alternative to gang life, as the dancers, who most likely have no access to formalized dance training, are able to freely express their aggression in a positive non-violent way. To see it being represented by a choreographer who I know is from an upper-middle class background, whose only exposure to krump was probably through Youtube videos, and whose street experience is limited to the sidewalks of his million-dollar neighborhood was not just infuriating, it was also insulting.

Do not get me wrong, I am fascinated with and in awe of a multitude of dance forms from across the globe. In a perfect life, I would be in the studio everyday learning from affirming and powerful dancers from abroad who have a deep understanding of their native or regional dance forms. Learning from and participating in dance forms that aren't culturally yours is ok. In fact, it makes a dancer more conscious of the world outside our immediate community. But there is a fine line to be drawn. Shasta Daisy McCarty beautifully articulates this in the article *Appreciation, Appropriation, and Exploitation in Ethnic Dance*: "Too often, our involvement in belly dance focuses on 'Where can I get that glittery costume piece and how soon can I wear it?' Consumerism isn't a substitute for cultural appreciation. The process of learning new styles should include exploring the past (and present) story behind each dance tradition. Ongoing education needs to be a top priority for all belly dancers" (McCarty, 2004). Take the time to at least do a basic Google search; you owe the community at least that much.

So how do racialised dancers escape the frustration of being in spaces that are exclusionary and offensive, or be recognized financially for our movement styles, body types, and contributions to the dance industry? For many, the only ways for constant employment has been by creating and producing their own dance companies. Many people are familiar with the world-renowned Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, which was originally created out of a frustration over the lack of consistent

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

dance opportunities for racialised dancers. In Canada, we have do have some amazing companies who are also producing work and ensuring that racialised dancers are employed and have a space on stage. That is not enough! In addition to those specialized spaces, all dance companies and schools should create the cultural shift needed to ensure that whether it is in a black-only dance company like COBA (Coalition of Black Artists), a post-secondary dance program, or a small dance studio in the suburbs, we are constantly creating affirming and inclusive spaces to nurture and support racialised dancers.

### ADDITIONAL READINGS:

- “Where are all the Black Ballet Dancers?”- Published Sept 4<sup>th</sup> 2012. *The Guardian*.
- *Zarifa’s Touch of Egypt: Appreciation, Appropriation, and Exploitation in Ethnic Dance*.
- “A Much Needed Primer on Cultural Appropriation”- Published Nov 13<sup>th</sup> 2012. Jezebel.com.
- “Victoria’s Secret’s Racist Garbage is Just Calling for a Boycott”- Published Nov 12<sup>th</sup> 2012. Jezebel.com.
- “The White Male Dancer Physique: An Object of White Desirability” by Lawrence Jackson. Published Sep 15, 2011.
- “The Nutcracker: A Beloved Holiday Tradition and Refuge for Racism”- by Chloe- Published Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 2010. Feministing.com.
- “Where are all the Black Dancers?”-by Olivia Goldhill and Sarah Marsh. Published Sept 4<sup>th</sup> 2012. *The Guardian*.

### **A discourse of tribalism: what is African/Tribal dancing?**

Another sigh.

In an effort to diversify the dance education offered, many studios/schools have inserted what is often referred to as ‘African’ or ‘Tribal’ dance forms. In rehearsal form, this means playing random drum music found on an initial search on Youtube, with no understanding of which instruments, where the music originates from, what is being said, and why the song exists. In performance, it is often more overt. Dancers are usually wearing loin cloths, have untamed hair, paint their faces in war paint, and are generally acting in a very wild and erratic

way. This is meant to be the representation of what we consider 'Africa' or its given synonym 'Tribal'.

If you have ever danced 'African' or 'tribal' dancing, where exactly was your dancing from? Which of the 54 different independent, unique, and sovereign African countries was that dance from? Which of the over 400 recognized tribes in the continent was the 'tribal' dance from? Africa is a vast, rich, and diverse continent, each country with their own subcultures, tribes, communities, and traditions. It is the second most populated continent and has some of the oldest records of civilization and culture, and yes dance is a part of that culture. Africa is not one big conglomerate and no, not every black dancer is well versed in its styles

More troubling is the frequent usage of 'tribal' to describe any forms of dancing that are deemed African or South American. The word 'tribal' means 'of tribes'. Tribes are described as a social group existing before the development of, or outside of, states. Given that the entire earth is now composed of national states, and that we were all from tribes at one point, why do we label a particular type of dance tribal and not others? Why have some forms of dance evolved and are sophisticated enough to be considered from countries, and some still considered tribal? And when you are dancing 'tribal' dance, I ask you this: from which region, which country, which subculture, which community, does this dance originate — and which style variation are you doing? We recognize over 45 different forms of ballroom and dance forms, from a variety of different regions and countries, different fusions, and different styles that are each distinct and separate. We recognize at least six different forms of ballet techniques/methods<sup>3</sup> (and ballet dancers defend their technique to the death). Yet, we reduce an entire continent, one billion people, hundreds of subcultures and styles to one type of dance. I challenge all dancers, dance educators, and dance lovers to decolonize the particular ways that we view sophisticated/unsophisticated, coded/non-coded forms of dancing, and to make sure that we are not insidiously 'othering' entire civilizations and communities by what is taught in the studio. As a teacher, I make a pledge to all my current and future students; I will never attempt to teach them 'tribal'.

### ADDITIONAL READINGS:

- Gateway Africa: List of African Tribes- <http://www.gateway-africa.com/tribe/>.
- Buzzle: African Dance Types- <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/african-dance-types.html>.
- Alkoli Dance Repertoire: Major Historical Styles- <http://www.alokli.com/site/dances/dances.html>.

### A discourse of hypermobility

If you have ever watched a ballet video from 50 years ago (even 20 years ago) and compared it to today, you will notice something significantly different: dancers now have near 180° turnout, ear-high extensions, longer achilles for bigger jumps, and solid-rock core strength for endless turns. Today's dance styles now demand a higher level of flexibility, mobility, and agility than ever before. You would expect that of any style as it evolves. But where do the non-hyper mobile dancers get included? What does an inclusive dance class look like, for people with low and limited mobility?

There is a growing body of research and dance produced out there that work to highlight the ableist constrictions of dance today. The disabled dance community is part of the broader disability justice movement, and seeks to insert a person's experiences with disability within the art form. This community is reclaiming the ways that we perceive disabled bodies in dance, both as an aesthetic, but also their integration and inclusion. Disabled dancers don't all prescribe to being treated like Hallmark inspiration stories for people to cry over and fawn over how "far they've come". Those sentiments, although well-meaning, are often condescending and superficial. Mia Mingus described it best in *Changing the Framework* — *Disability Justice*:

People usually think of disability as an individual flaw or problem, rather than as something partly created by the world we live in. It is rare that people think about disability as a political experience or as encompassing a community full of rich histories, cultures and legacies. Disability is framed as lacking, sad and undesirable: a shortcoming at best, a tragedy at worst. Disabled people are used as the poster

children...For many people, even just the idea that we can understand disability as “not wrong” is a huge shift in thinking. (Mingus, 2010)

As Mingus further discusses, it is a shift of thinking that is required. This shift starts with deconstructing our images of the ‘ideal’ dance aesthetic, and acknowledging that dance has to be transcended beyond a series of shapes that are all similar.

For an audience, the disabled body when presented in an honest, full, and autonomous form is often confusing. Ann Cooper Albright, a dance artist and cultural critic, describes this experience when she performed a nude dance piece in her wheelchair. In an attempt to reclaim the expressive aspects of her own body, Albright forced the audience to confront their own thoughts and perceptions of movement, body aesthetic, beauty, etc. As Albright mentions, when you see such an image,

most likely you don’t see a dancer, for the combined discourses of idealized femininity and aesthetic virtuosity which serve to regulate theatrical dancing throughout much of the Western world refuse the very possibility of this opening moment. As a dancer, I am a body on display. As a body on display, I am expected to reside within a certain continuum of fitness and bodily control, not to mention sexuality and beauty. But as a woman in a wheelchair, I am neither expected to be a dancer nor to position myself in front of an audience’s gaze. In doing this performance, I confronted a whole host of contradictions both within myself and within the audience. The work was a conscious attempt to both deconstruct the representational codes of dance production and communicate an “other” bodily reality. ” (Albright, 1998)

It is these contradictions and deconstructions of the body that will allow us as a community to redefine what dance is, as well as work for the broader inclusion of ‘other’ body types into our community. To be seen as full, beautiful, technical, and talented people.

The inclusion of disability (physical, mental, intellectual, psychological, cognitive) within our companies, classes, and dance communities must be fully integrated and wholesome. While I believe that specialized spaces only for members of a particular community is important, those spaces must also be negotiated and included within all dance spaces. These specialized spaces often are created because of the lack

of inclusion within mainstream dance education/professional work. When someone with a disability is present, they are often met with the Hallmark-esque attitude I described earlier. These attitudes towards these bodies is articulated by Albright's *Strategic Abilities: Negotiating the Disabled Body in Dance*. Albright describes the radical and transformative work being done by dance groups who seek to integrate visibly disabled and visibly non-disabled dancers. (Albright uses the term 'visibly' to "shift the currency of the term disability from an either/or paradigm to a continuum which might include not only the most easily identifiable disabilities, such as some mobility impairments, but also less visible disabilities, including ones such as eating disorders and histories of severe abuse." To Albright, "all of these disabilities profoundly affect one's physical position in the world, although they certainly don't all affect the accessibility of the world in the same way."). When discussing the reception of these groups, they are often critiqued and receive acclaim not for their innovative or rigorous choreography, but for the 'human interest', once again leaving disabled dancers to be looked on as inspiration for abled-bodied audiences, bodies that are deemed to be 'overcoming' and 'struggling', but never sites of beauty, strength, ferociousness, and autonomy.

It seems that although there is a growing number of integrated dance, in which companies are breaking down what an audience is used to in terms of movement, it is still done in a tokenistic and alternative way. Albright considers this a critical marginalization which "implicitly suggests that this new work, while important, won't really disrupt the existing aesthetic structures of cultural institutions. For instance, when Dancing Wheels, a group dedicated to promoting "the diversity of dance and the abilities of artists with physical challenges," joined up with the Cleveland Ballet in 1990 (to become Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels), it was as an educational and outreach extension of the mainstream arts organization. The Dancing Wheels dancers rarely perform in the company's regular repertoire, and certainly never in classical works such as Balanchine's *Serenade*" (Albright, 1998). While integration is important, it is important to understand that true radicalization doesn't see the preservation of the 'classics' for one body type and space for the 'others' to create new stuff, it is all-encompassing.

For true liberation and a truly revolutionary artistic form, dance has to expand its access points for the varying bodies that occupy

our communities: disabled, Deaf, blind, Mad, fat, crip, psych-survivor, etc. These bodies have radicalized our “porcelain image of the dancer as graceful sylph, disabled dancers force the viewer to confront the cultural opposite of the classical body<sup>4</sup>” (Albright, 1998).

#### **ADDITIONAL READINGS:**

- Ann Cooper Albright: *Strategic Abilities: Negotiating the Disabled Body in Dance*.
- Mia Mingus: *Changing the Framework: Disability Justice*.

#### **Affirmative dance. Is there such a thing?**

Taking in these discourses that are prevalent in our artistic communities, what does an affirming dance space look like? As artists, performers, and creators, our identities, experiences, and realities are the foundations of the work that we create. Creating affirming dance spaces means creating decolonized spaces where racialised and Indigenous experiences are validated and authentic, that reject the binaries of gender identity, that sees access and accessibility as foundational frameworks and not afterthoughts, that actively agitates our preconceived notions of dance and movement.

Affirming dance is acknowledging the political aspects of certain identities, whose sole existence is a form of resistance in and of itself.

It is employing performance equity, acknowledging that faces and bodies not traditionally represented on stage must be welcomed, nurtured, recruited, and actively pursued.

It is embodying an intersectional approach, which acknowledge that a dancer is not just a dancer, a dancer can be queer, trans, woman, racialised, Indigenous, disabled, Deaf, Mad, poor, fat, different, similar, othered, and existing on, in, and around the margins.

Affirming dance is allowing people to bring their ‘baggage’ and experiences through the door and not forcing people to leave parts of their identity behind.

Affirming dance is acknowledging all of that, and giving each dancer the freedom and autonomy to freely document and share their lived experience and identities with the audience.

### Current state

As dancers, artists, art-lovers and supporters, we live a time where public perception of the arts is in constant flux. We often hear of the dismantlement of the welfare state from a community services/healthcare perspective, but that dismantlement has and is continuing to trickle down to the arts. As our governments are further pushing the global neoliberal agenda, the arts are slowly shifting from a public good to a perceived luxury. It is no longer a necessity to immerse young people into all aspects of arts, nor ensure that the performing arts is accessible to the broader population. Nevertheless the tangible human psychological benefits of participating, watching, and engaging with the arts, adequately funding and supporting the arts, at all levels, is just good public policy. As artists, we have economics on our side. Arts and Culture contribute about \$46 billion annually to the Canadian economy, more than Canada's forestry and insurance industry combined. The sector employs over 640,000 people. That is almost 1/5th of Canada's population. We are a country immersed in the arts, so as such our policies should reflect that. Additionally, government's return of investments into the arts are generally fruitful. For every \$1 of real value-added GDP invested in the performing arts, \$2.70 is generated in nongovernmental revenue.<sup>6</sup>

Funding varies from province-to-province but there exists a lack of centralized national strategy for the arts at all levels. For example, In Ontario, while funding for the arts councils has stabilized, arts programs at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education are continuing to struggle. As our post-secondary institutions continue to be chronically underfunded by the provincial governments and as we see drastic reductions in operating grants for programs, it is the smaller, studio-based fine arts programs that are often the first to be cut/reduced. For example, Capilona University in British Columbia recently proposed cutting two arts diploma program in an effort to eliminate a \$1.3 million shortfall.<sup>7</sup> Mount Royal University of Calgary, Alberta has recently cut a number of programs, including music performance and theatre arts.<sup>8</sup> The Toronto District School Board has proposed \$2 million in cuts that would eliminate some music programs across the city.<sup>9</sup> These examples from different provinces have all occurred within the last two months of me writing this article. It



is simply not enough to keep arts council funding stabilized, but at the same time claw back on community/primary/secondary/post-secondary arts programs.

Federal, Provincial, and Municipal governments have arts education programs under each of their respective jurisdictions, and choosing which ones to adequately fund each year while sacrificing funding for another does a disservice to the sector, but more importantly fails to acknowledge the cyclical nature of art-making. To be able to work and thrive as artists, our crafts need to be nurtured at all levels. The effects of a shrinking artistic young population will not be felt until they are adults and deciding which careers to take on. The investment must be done early on to ensure longevity, but more importantly to ensure that there are well-funded and supported artists of all ages.

## **A shift in culture**

### *The commercialization factor*

Arts-based education programs, community organizations, and arts companies are now heavily relying heavily on private and corporate financing to survive. Whether it is the slow privatization of post-secondary programs, or dance companies now increasingly relying on high level fundraising, it seems that artists are now asking for money more than they are creating, performing, and learning. This slow shift has meant that the arts are now seen less as a public good, but more as a sellable and commercialized product for our consumption. While I think it is important to be producing work that speaks to the community that you are based in, curiosity-driven artistic exploration is still a key pillar to the work that we do. We must experiment with many different versions of our work before landing on a final product. Sadly, this kind of exploration is no longer the focus. One has to be composing, choreographing, directing, writing, or painting something that can be packaged neatly and commercialized...whether or not it is profound or authentic

Artists are no longer social commentators and documentators of the human condition, but just pawns in the mass consumer culture. Many choreographers that I know have to grapple with the fine balance of artistic freedom/integrity, and the need to be producing

**OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES**



**Rock Bottom Movement, choreographed by Alyssa Martin, takes dance from the theatre and introduces them to the public via public performances and reclaiming of public space.**

sellable dance. This balance is hard to strike, of course, because there are often bills to pay and lives to live. It becomes hard as an artist to let's say create a piece on poverty in your community, when the biggest funders of artistic projects in that community are the very companies whose economic practices create that class division.

The arts should be accessible to whomever wants to support/partake, which means that individuals, governments, associations, companies should engage in the sector, support, and integrate the arts in their worlds and communities, but there is a fine line to be drawn and artistic organizations, collectives, agencies must be protected and divorced from the strengthening pressure of private entities. (It has always struck me as weird that banks, insurance and telecommunications companies, and other large corporations now 'own' entire arts festivals that were once community-driven. How can Scotiabank own a multiarts festival? Or TD for that matter?)

### *Dance for whom?*

The shift in culture and thinking of the arts has also meant a shift in attitude surrounding its availability, accessibility, and what role it plays in our communities. What role do we as the public have to ensure that every young person has access to school and community dance, acting, music, and painting classes for free? What role do governments have to ensure that dance companies are able to produce shows that are financially accessible to working class families, but at the same time not sacrifice the need to pay living wages to working class artists? It is a tough balance to strike, and I'm sure many dance producers everywhere would love to pay their artists higher wages, dance teachers to provide free and low-cost dance classes, and companies to offer free or pay-what-you-can dance performances for a community. Therein lies the reasons why our governments have a duty to support the arts. It is to ensure that artists are able to produce art that is accessible to all, while at the same time earning a living wage.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the funding available for a project and the costs of classes that can be offered, wage for performers, and audience ticket prices. It is a relationship that must be agitated a bit for the broader expansion of our cultural art form. It is rare to find a dance class in Toronto for less than \$20 a class. Our

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

performance unions are enduring public resistance (sometimes from dancers themselves who are part of a generation of performance artists who are actively discouraged and fear mongered from unionizing). I did a quick Google search on some shows that I know are coming up: it seems that one cannot go to the theatre for less than \$40 these days. (decent tickets to the ballet in which the performers wont look like tiny dots are well over \$100). These are statistics that should infuriate every performance artist. But where is the rage? Where are the revolutionary actions? Where are the marches of solidarity? Where are the broad base calls for a national vision for the arts? Where are the collective actions demanding full restoration and increase of public funding for the performing arts? Where are the dancer activists?

### Radicalizing dance

So far, I've presented more problems to ponder more than I've provided solutions. If the solutions were that simple, I think they would have been employed by now, but I see a much more pervasive phenomenon: a dangerous trend of collective obliviousness to the issues and problems of our movement and industry. Dancers are now passed through a training machine that introduces them to technique, teaches them how to obey orders, and throws them out into the real world. It was my introduction to the student movement that gave me the space and tools to actively question, complicate, and agitate. Thus, radicalizing dance starts with the acknowledgement that dancers are inherently activists. Our role is not to simply perform but to actively work to restructure our common human experience and our understanding of society and community. Dance educators are seed planters who have a profound impact on young people (both future dancers as well as recreational young dancers who will go into every field of study), and dance lovers/audiences are active agents in shaping our society.

**Radicalizing dance starts with a shift of thinking (and policy changes don't hurt either).** As such, I present you all with my personal manifesto of dance and activism.

A radical, transformative, and affirming dance community is one that:

- Provides free and accessible dance education to all: free dance/movement programs in every primary/secondary school, accessible after-school programs, and publicly-funded dance studios that can be accessed by anyone, regardless of income/class background.
- Includes education systems that see no further cuts to the arts, but instead sees a restoration of funding to ensure that the arts continue to be a necessity to the wellbeing of our children, youth, and society.
- Acknowledges that the revolution was not born out of Facebook. Get off your computer, go take a dance class, join a community arts coalition/collective, write an opinion piece, participate in actions to protect the arts.
- Practices performance equity- Identities that are not traditionally represented in dance are given the space and resources to be able to have access. Whether it is providing transit tokens/passes for students in need, diversifying the curriculum to include different types of movements, developing an alternative low-mobility version of existing curriculum, or allowing dancers to define their gender expression, giving agency to dancers from marginalized communities will enrich our communities as a whole.
- Positively influences someone's perception of body image and identity, their acceptance in the dance community, and their overall well-being; which starts with their first plié and ends with their last.
- Provides a safe(r) and inclusive space for all interested persons, no matter what age or background, to learn, share, and grow.
- Provides a healing space where personal baggage is welcomed.
- Sees the 'alternative' dance companies ( ex: ILL NANA/Diversity Dance Company, Matadanze, Momo Dance, Propeller Dance, Toronto's Coalition of Black Artists, Kahawi Dance Theatre, and others) grow from the margins to the centre of dance culture in Canada.
- Encourages and fosters the beauty, courage, and ferociousness of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Transexual, Intersex , Questioning, 2-Spirit, Asexual, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Variant, Gender-Queer, Femme, Butch,

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

- Drag, Dyke, Pansexual, and Queer communities.
- Creates a space for discussion, debate, and discourse around local and global issues.
  - Acknowledges that everyone is a dancer and that dance should be for everyone!
- 

**RODNEY DIVERLUS** is a Haitian-born, Florida-raised, and Toronto-(re)born-activist, dancer, choreographer, and community organiser. He is currently finishing his degree in Performance Dance at Ryerson University and focuses on the intersection of the performing arts and activism. Check out his upcoming projects at [spectrumproject.ca](http://spectrumproject.ca)

### ENDNOTES

- 1 CAT Maps & Schedule, Collier County Government, 2012. <http://www.colliergov.net/Index.aspx?page=2523>.
- 2 Dehnart, Andy. So You Think You Can Dance Archive. Reality Blurb, July 30th 2010 [http://www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/archives/so\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_can\\_dance/2010\\_Jul\\_30\\_billy\\_bell](http://www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/archives/so_you_think_you_can_dance/2010_Jul_30_billy_bell).
- 3 Ballet Methods, Ottawa Ballet School. <http://www.ottawaballetschool.com/Ballet-Methods.html>.
- 4 Albright, Ann Cooper. Strategic Abilities: Negotiating the Disabled Body in Dance. First appeared in *Disability, Art, and Culture* (Part 2) vol. XXXVII, no. 3, Summer 1998. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0037.313>.
- 5 Valuing Culture: Measuring and Understanding Canada's Creative Economy, Conference Board of Canada, August 2008.
- 6 Finances of Performing Arts Organizations, Hill Strategies, November 2008. <http://hillstrategies.com/content/finances-performing-arts-organizations-0>.
- 7 Thompson, Steven. Capilano University arts program cuts spark backlash. Straight, April 26 2013.
- 8 Weismiller, Bryan. MRU to cut arts programs to fill \$14M budget shortfall. Calgary Herald, April 17th 2013.
- 9 Addawoo, Lindsey. TDSB Proposed Music Program Cuts – Whose Line is it Anyway. Global News, June 3rd 2011.