

CREATING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART: CAN DANCE CHANGE THE WORLD?

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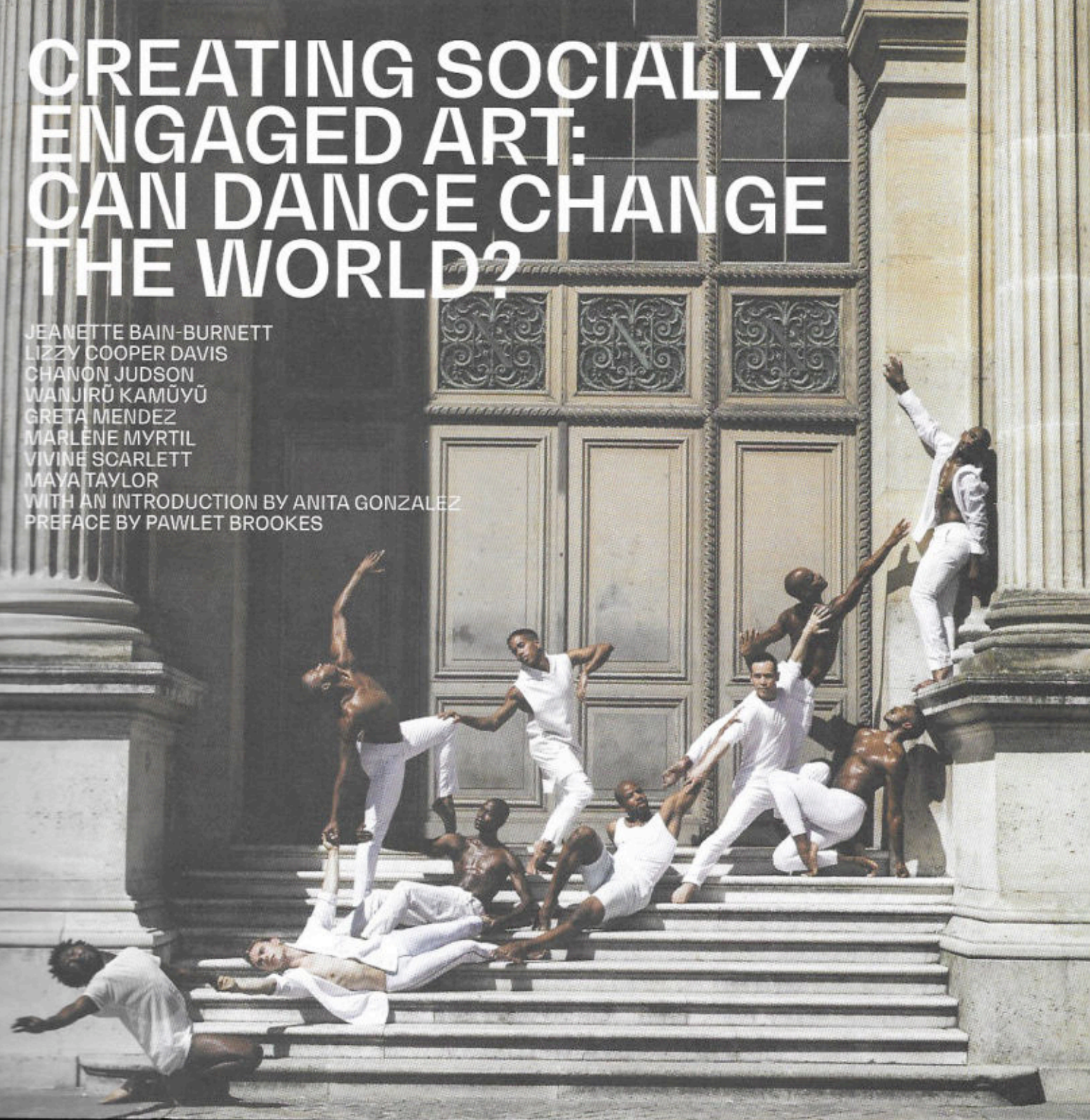
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DANCE IS NO LONGER THE PANACEA OF THE ELITE

Marlène Myrtil

Introduction

What does it mean to give my vision of the world when I am a choreographer, a dancer, a teacher with a major activity in Martinique?

This morning I opened the window and looked out over the landscape, the sky, the sea, nature, the city, life, simply from where I am now in the North Caribbean. Then I just thought about the beauty of our planet, the weaving of memories, of life. How long have we been communicating through art, culture... Does all this still make sense today in this world turned upside down by a global health crisis? More than ever, I am looking for these foundations that inspire me to understand, measure and analyse the artistic issues that affect me and this is particularly true with dance, which for me is the reflection of my body, mind and heart. Can dance change the world? My education, my history and my experience open a wide field of reflection to this incisive and moving question.

It is with a return to my journey as a dance student and performer, nourished over seven years by an apprenticeship to pedagogy and the stage, that I will describe my vision of dance by broadening three fundamental points:

Firstly, I will question *the notions of dance and world* in their popular, intellectual and inter-relational resonance. The word world vibrates for me like the heritage of Edouard Glissant's concept of *Tout-*

Monde (the world in its entirety). Gone is the view of a primitive or highly civilised world, there is an urgent need to consider that people are in search of relationships, now signing an epic that is as glorious as it is miserable. It is this universal angle that leads me to embrace the word "dance" on the widest possible scale, while signifying my history and development that are strongly linked to identities and territories.

Then, briefly, I would talk about what touched me in the approach to the genesis of this art: the metaphysical and spiritual character, *the sacred*. Finally, I will dwell on my own discovery of the social resonance of this art, thus linked to education, philosophy, the *political act*. Mentioning the importance of existing, constructing and expressing through the moving body is, in my opinion, essential to measure the power of dance.

In a second part, I will focus on the question "*Creating Socially Engaged Art: Can Dance Change The World?*" By observing and questioning the angles of my work of creation and transmission of dance in the Caribbean, with my company Kaméléonite, for over twenty years. The pedagogical ground will be cleared first of all, emphasising the links and direct repercussions with the public, the communities, the territories, then because there is adherence and actualisation of this ground work in the creation, I will expose the topics, the forms, the contents which constitute our choreographic work.



Marlène Myrtil, photograph by JB Barret

To conclude this analysis, since we are living in a particular period, I would suggest that rather than providing a simple answer or hope to the question "Can dance change the world?" to echo the initiatives of the dance world on an international scale, because *dancing is now becoming a pure, militant, resilient, powerful and accessible act...*

Dance and the World

It seems quite complex today to speak of a universal dance at a time when techniques, practices and styles are multiplying in the search for an efficient, aesthetic and innovative objective.

Dance, like a large building, offers us multiple doors, windows, balconies and stoops. To enter this artistic sphere is, in a way, to prepare oneself to embrace the immense depth and infinite richness of this art.

However, let us look at the foundations of ritual, folk, traditional, recreational, academic, theatrical, therapeutic, performed, practised dances... Studies and analyses always bring us back to the vertiginous tool that is the body. The body always expresses itself through movement and its poetics is quite simply a reflection of humanity itself.

The spheres of traditional dances touch those of academic dances, as well as somatic practices, dialogues exist, are created, are recreated until the elaboration of a new texture, a new device of writing, performance or even a new method...

Like languages and customs, dances rub up against

each other, mingle, question each other, challenge each other, and re-imagine themselves, just like communities, peoples and nations. It is this idea of ramification that interests us today, in the image of the interpenetration of cultures and imaginaries of Edouard Glissant¹:

"Qu'est-ce que la créolisation? C'est un mélange inextricable de cultures dont on ne peut prédire à l'avance les résultantes. Ce phénomène appelle une nouvelle manière de penser, rompant avec l'ancienne qui consistait à réagir en disant : "Je ne veux pas de ça car cela ne vient pas de chez moi." Je crois cette notion de créolisation utile pour penser le monde d'aujourd'hui."

"What is creolisation? It is an inextricable mixture of cultures whose results cannot be predicted in advance. This phenomenon calls for a new way of thinking, breaking with the old way of reacting by saying: "I don't want this because it doesn't come from me." "I believe that this notion of creolisation is useful for thinking about today's world."

The way I embraced dance is the very image of this mixing...

I was born and raised in mainland France. Like all little girls of my age, I loved taking to the barre for the first time and doing my first ballet galas from the age of nine, and yet, the feeling of a narrowed vision appeared very quickly. Despite excellent results in exams at the conservatory, I was given the roles of the Black Swan, Russian doll or even devouring wolf in the classical ballets of Swan Lake, Coppelia or Little Red Riding

Hood... The rest of this journey was galvanising... I practiced jazz dance with Matt Mattox at the Agora in Evry with Rick Odums, Jeffrey Carter, Avon Testamark, David Byers in Paris Centre Clichy, I integrated and toured with the Gwoka folk group, Fleurs des Iles, from Longjumeau in Essonne, then with the Libota group, a traditional Congolese group... My professionalisation was confirmed with the choreographers Irène Tassembédo, Germaine Acogny, Jean-François Duroure, Max Laure Bourjolly and Maurice Béjart.

In this round of dances with different forms and codes, African dance, contemporary dance, academic dance, hip-hop dances, I learned new body patterns, which instead of contradicting each other, piled up, conversed, while my mind and spirit pushed away all the barriers imposed by the differences. It is while staying in the United States, while I met Bill T Jones and a whole Diaspora of dancers from all origins, that I became aware of this unity.

Meeting my peers on the other side of the world from where I live was decisive. It was on the advice of Bill T Jones that I wrote my first solo, *Tangente*, whose forms and contents flirted with African, Caribbean and European influences. Embracing dance means exposing oneself to the whole world.

Dance and the Sacred

If there is one notion that remains inescapable, it is the vast spiritual and sacred interpretation of dance.

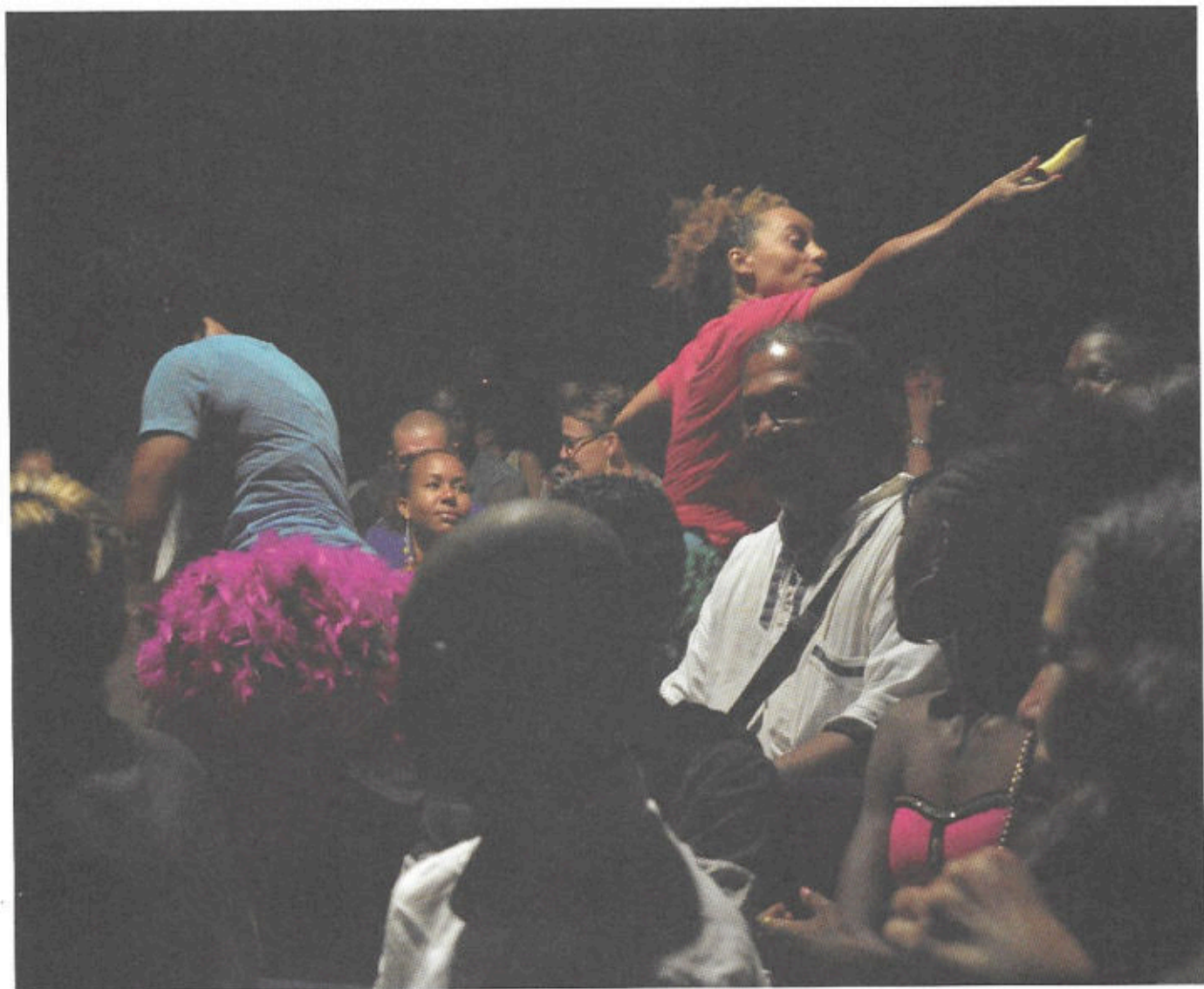
As Elisabeth Zana describes very well in her book *Le Danse et Le Sacré*.²

In return, it is sweet to integrate Nietzsche's quotation "*I can only believe in a god who understands the dance*".³ Thus dance, like music, has a prominent place in daily life, tradition, ceremonial, the extraordinary...

I am thinking of the traditional practice of Bharatanatyam, initially considered as a performance art, which has become an inescapable part of the Indian cultural heritage, despite its prohibition under the British monarchy. Frédéric Louis described this dance as "*a ritual intended to honour the god to whom it is offered, and a particular language reserved for the deity alone*".⁴

Who has not been fascinated by the dances of the Greek theatre...? By the hypnotic dance of the whirling dervish... Originating in Eastern countries, this art of movement is in every way linked to religious practice while signifying an absolute link with the cosmos...As for Afro-Cuban dance based on the identities of the Orishas, it simply brings the identity of the performer and dancer closer to the world of the gods.

At a very young age, I felt this promise of spiritual elevation by watching dancers evolve. When I started out and took my first steps on stage I remember being marked by Mireille Nègre⁵ a prima ballerina who had converted become ordained as a Carmelite nun, she continued to appear on television with her solo excerpts. My experience of traditional African dance also led me to the spirit of the dances, seeking to merge with the totemic representations and the objects and accessories whose slightest manipulation revealed the importance of the sacred.



Marlène Myrtil and Mynam Soulanges. Principe de precaution, photograph by Denis Rion Saint Laurent du Maroni French Guyana

This relationship with the non-ordinary is what each dancer seeks to achieve on stage to transport the audience. In this, the sacredness of dance dares to transform the world through its extreme poetics.

Dance and the Political Act

Working with choreographers from all walks of life, I gradually came to understand the power of contemporary gesture and its intention. Pina Bausch's inescapable phrase⁶ "Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost" began to take on its full meaning for me. Through my training and my preparation for the state diploma, I discovered the history of a dance that interested me a lot, that of an expressionist dance stemming from the German movement like Mary Wigmann and that of an American modern dance that was rigorous and efficient enough to bring out the abstract from the great human themes. I am thinking of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham...

I understood then the power of an aesthetic, of a form, of a deconstruction, of a word, of a fall, of a suspension. These precursors influenced my conception of space, time and form. They have also, in the image of a world ravaged by the two wars, shaken up the conventions of ballet to nourish a need for authentic, strong and sometimes subversive expression.

Today I know and feel how my work as a performer with choreographers such as Germaine Acogny and Jean-François Duroure has been foundational. In the same way, my meeting and learning with

Bill T Jones allowed a sort of fusion of my physical qualities and my intellectual, social and philosophical aspirations, as well as the awareness of being a racialised woman artist.

When dance serves an argument, then the vocabulary develops, the research becomes subtle, risky, inventive and exciting. I am always in admiration of the work of Ohad Naharin, Pim-Pim Tom or Maguy Marin... I enjoy remembering that behind an impalpable technique, there is a clear intention that touches my heart and mind instantly.

Through my various encounters and experiences, I have explored and questioned the foundations of a contemporary Caribbean dance, influenced by its history and crossed by the richness of dances from the continent, and it is perhaps in this way that I have been led to reflect on my appropriation of the dance in terms of creation, interpretation and transmission. The dance I experienced as a performer has already changed so many paradigms... How could my work bring more to communities, to peoples, to small territories like Martinique?

My work and my vision of dance. **How does my artistic involvement in the territory contribute to changing the world?**

In order to give meaning to my creative process in the immensity of this landscape where every danced action is charged with meaning, I have sought out the key words which, for me, constitute the true artistic and cultural levers of the Kaméléonite company: sharing, community, education, relationships, social

commitment, accompaniment, for the transmission; heritage, dance in situ, environment, decolonisation, rituals, anthropology, for the creation.

Transmission

The company's work is aimed at a variety of audiences and each artistic and cultural project is an invitation to a collective, poetic and meaningful journey.

Sharing and Community

Since 2012, the company has been involved in cultural projects linked to city policies, particularly in the commune of Lamentin, Martinique. The notions of sharing and community are linked. We approach communities in remote areas of the communes and the social link is often a pretext to penetrate families and difficult neighbourhoods. The change and progression of the project makes us more porous and sensitive to the forms that emerge: speech, theatrical play and writing accompany the dance. Often identities, strengths of character, talents and laughter reveal a desire to share an almost extraordinary time, surreal and stimulating for body and mind, sometimes with the help of somatic practices such as relaxation, qi qong, the Feldenkreis method... The moment devoted to the public performance, the educational outing or the filming closes the project and reveals the transformation of bodies, words, dances, improvisations... The COVID-19 health crisis has broken these links... We need to find other ways to be present. Digital tools are becoming interesting, with our latest

project aimed at adults and seniors, we focused on the use of the mobile phone and the possibility of nourishing a daily moment of bodywork through a seven minute video inviting beneficiaries to practice individually from home. The feedback has been strong, positive and even accompanied by messages of gratitude. Offering this type of digital workshop is a way of remaining present and active in the community while leaving the participant free to practice, repeat the sequence at leisure or even do it as a family.

Education and Relations

Since 2000, the company has brought its educational and artistic work to the school.

Arts education in schools increases potential tenfold... Here we talk about relationships as if the arts workers were becoming a bit like big brothers or sisters... Mediators between the class and the teacher. In this form of pedagogy the communication, the relationship is not so much verbal, it is above all physical.

How will my dancing body awaken and question the dancing body of the young person? It is this relationship that is at stake and it excludes any form of discrimination, it poses from the outset the artistic as a language accessible to all...

I was trained in the Danse à l'école programme in France organised by Marcelle Bonjour. It was a question of setting up common tools between the Ministries of Education and Culture in order to give pupils a taste for contemporary dance through the search for poetic, creative and authentic gestures,

while at the same time tackling the fundamentals and techniques of this discipline. Thus the objective is no longer to give classes but to make three choreographic interventions of two to three hours in order to find material for creation and then to present a production during final auditions at the theatre. This extraordinary adventure gives everyone the responsibility to create, to dance, to be the author and interpreter of their own movement. It is with this device that I have initiated all the company's school projects for the past twenty years in primary, secondary and high schools. In Martinique, and in the Caribbean in general, this methodology goes against a formatted, strict education, based on a relationship of hierarchy and obedience. The pupil seeks his place in this proposal and sometimes expects more than being nourished by learning dance steps. However, the transformation takes place and communicates very quickly within a class, whatever the age of the young people. The imagination and the physical availability quickly allow a total liberation of the bodies, it is then advisable to refine the work by instructions of writing, thus developing the listening, the apprehension of the space, the time and the nuances of the form.

In times of social and health crisis, these artistic interventions focus on the need to listen to oneself, to be subtle in one's attention and gaze on others, to have a refined perception of time, and to have confidence in a performing and awake physical body. The dance is thus transformed, regenerated and expresses a whole emotional field that has remained silent.

Social commitment and support

The company has been working in the psychiatric field for sixteen years, ten years in France and six years in the Caribbean. The word social can take us to less visible, less surface level spheres such as schools, animation centres, cultural centres. In health structures, physical and artistic projects bring physical and moral well-being to users.

Here I am referring to our experience in psychiatric institutions, gerontology departments, day hospitals and medical and educational institutes. By making this type of public active through the workshop or participative through the invitation to attend a performance and exchange with the artist, I am convinced that the practice of dance triggers a therapeutic path. This is slow but sure and deep because it stimulates an unconscious that is perfectly tuned in and in search of sensations and emotions that go beyond the everyday. Because madness is terribly endearing when it unties itself and gives up. It reflects a certain authenticity of being that is precious and can grow, day after day, bringing physical, mental and kinaesthetic improvements. For us pedagogues, it is a framework that opens the imagination of creation through unexpected paths, devoid of any technical or intellectual verbiage. I also like to be inspired by this articulation which consists in teaching by de-structuring the logic of movement in space and time.

Creation

The creation of choreographic pieces - sixteen to date - reveals my political and poetic vision of the Caribbean space.

Legacy and Dance in situ

Our priority in the territory is to make our dance visible and accessible. The lack of infrastructures to put together live performances has very quickly guided our choice of artistic locations. Nourished by a multiple experience as a performer in the public spaces during ten years in metropolitan France, I have pursued this approach of dance in situ by choosing to enhance the tangible and intangible heritage of the territory of Martinique. Thus, communes steeped in history such as the town of Saint-Pierre, the former capital, has many historical sites, renovated or not, which have inspired the creation of dance pieces, by day, by night, in performances, in film, with light or sometimes multimedia devices. The possibilities and the places are multiple; our artistic teams invest a bodywork linked to historical rebounds, architectures and contexts of colonisation.

For audiences who do not go to the theatre, it is a real discovery of a type of choreography that resonates strongly in the everyday environment, it is to take a new look at a ruin, a dwelling, a building and to let oneself be carried away towards an immediate realistic poetry. This choice of work is physically demanding for us, but it defends a sensitive and powerful proposition, it deconstructs the idea of

representation and above all creates a proximity with the spectator. Those who pass by, stop, stay, return, observe, and are captivated. This approach contributes to making contemporary creation popular and sensitive.

Environment and Decolonisation

It is important to look at the themes of our creations and to question our first reflection on Dance and the political act. Since 2008, the issues we have tackled are strongly committed and linked to the specificities of the territory. Thus, we have created a lot to talk about and clarify our positions, in particular on the theme of the health emergency linked to the presence of pesticides in the soil and the use of plastic in Martinique. The choreographic piece entitled Principe de précaution (Precautionary Principle), co-created in 2014 with Myriam Soulanges, a choreographer from Guadeloupe, was remounted as an outdoor work in 2019 and is still relevant today.

In the same way, the Agricultural Chronicles created in 2020 raise awareness of the need to take care of the nourishing earth and to consider the agricultural work necessary to preserve local production. It expresses the decolonisation of bodies and soils... and contemporary choreography is based on this notion of rootedness, solidity, stability, durability in spite of climatic incidences...

Furthermore, I am now part of Kolectif 13, a collective of choreographers and dancers from Martinique born out of the health crisis. We improvise in situ in the

urban space in completely unusual places in the city, thus attracting attention to a contemporary dance that is not clichéd, not European, accessible, playful and strong.

Rituals and Anthropology

The leitmotiv of the artistic team of the Kaméléonite company: *"We do not wish to cut ourselves off from who we are... Functioning by mimicry in the artistic field cannot serve the development of our identity..."*

Remaining sensitive to a strong tradition and a desire to remain connected to the people of Martinique, we now create mainly from surveys of resource persons. This moment when we go looking for the history, the point of view, the experience in the word of the other is important in this country where orality holds its place at all costs... Thus these surveys are a material for creation, by their contents, their forms and their historicity. It is often more than an interview, an ephemeral link that creates an exchange and an authentic convergence towards a concern, a passion, knowledge and transmission. What I would call "ritual" infiltrates the stories, the words, and the attitudes that are imperceptibly found in the creation crystallising an ephemeral exchange. This authenticity and this person-to-person relationship has its place in the choreographic creation and nourishes a creative perspective intimately linked to the word.

Conclusion

What founded my work, when I started my career, is linked to the sacred and political vibration of dance. One can also admit that it is precisely these two elements that make dance current, present and a generator of change in our society.

However, the work I am developing in the Caribbean allows me to delve into my research by linking it directly to communities. Dance today is no longer the panacea of an elite, it is truly inspired by the journey of peoples around the world, and the concept of the creolisation of the world suggests that the advance is taking place despite ourselves!

In this context, rather than changing the world, dance saves the world by remaining present, adaptable, resilient and victorious. Dance brings peace, healing and delight to the human being, who participates through their gaze, intention, physical or emotional commitment...

If we take a brief look at the cultural actors today, in a period of pandemic, we can feel the demand, the desire to accompany the world in its mutation and to underline its impulses, its bruises, its desires for harmony, repair, communication and love...

As political as they are artistic, the meetings and events mark the need to express a profession, a vocation, a job, a collective vision. The dance sector spreads its wings to survive the current events and this is both touching and reassuring for humanity. On the web, in theatres, festivals, arts professionals, federations, artists' collectives are creating and

gathering: all of them are re-questioning the economic foundations of culture and are looking at the extremely vital link between art and its audience, art and the future of the world...⁷

At the end of the day, aren't we simply the immediate echo of the voices of a people who are under pressure? So let us work on what is now our mission!

Footnotes

1. Moussaoui R., Nouvet F., Glissant, E., (2007) *Interview with Edouard Glissant. L'Humanité*. [Article] Available at: <https://www.humanite.fr/edouard-glissant-agis-dans-ton-liou-pense-avec-le-monde-457163> [Accessed 13 September 2021]
2. Zana, E., (1996) *La Danse et Le Sacra. "Voyage dans la danse des origines à nos jours"* [Dance and the Sacred Dance and the Sacred: A Journey in Dance from the Origins to the Present] Dervy
3. Nietzsche, F., (1885) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*.
4. Louis, F., (1957) *The Sacred Dance of India*
5. Rus, E., and Nègre, M., (2009), *Eric de Rus interview with Mireille Nègre: "L'art et la vie"* [Art and Life].
6. *Pina: dance, dance, otherwise we are lost*. (2011). Film. Directed by Wim Wenders.
7. "No culture, no future" (March 2021) A large demonstration to defend art and culture, Paris.

