

CAN DO CAN DANCE

HAMBURGER TANZTAGE MIT ROYSTON MALDOOM (RHYTHM IS IT!)

Interview zwischen Mekbul Jemal und Nina Pelletier, 19.09.06

[...] I have seen you dancing and performing, seen you teaching and choreographing and I was participant in one of your workshops. What has impressed you most and in which way changed your life since you decided to dance.

Well, first, when I was a kid I didn't have any idea about dancing or I never thought that I would become a dancer, it just happened to me. [...].

After I started to dance when I was fifteen, it took me two, three years to understand what I was doing and to see the change. So after three years I started to understand what I was doing, it was contemporary dance – because all we knew in Ethiopia was traditional dance, right? [...] I was nothing and I started from zero, and now I am something, you know, I travel a lot, I see a lot of people, I perform, I teach, I choreograph [...] you have to learn how to do that and Royston and his colleagues gave me that training for about five years and to use it and change my life and I've learned a lot in these five years. [...]

If I understood you right you are still with Adugna Company. You are a dancer in the company where the whole group is performing, but you are also teaching – is that right? What do you teach, what is important to you about teaching and what kind of people do you teach?

When we teach in Adugna, we are not teaching just dance or just choreographing. [...] we teach [...] everybody that comes to learn, and we also go to them to teach them. [...] we are teaching them about their problems through dance, about problems like HIV, Aids, problems like family planning, problems like if you abuse your child and how to solve that problem... [...] There is this big issue in dance – issues around Ethiopia and other countries how to solve those problems [...] Right now we have a lot of kids coming to our company who are learning how to dance and choreograph and how to teach and through that they are also learning how to change their lives through dance.

How do you find the participants or the people who want to be taught by you?

[...] Especially the young people, they are very interested and want to become like us – they want to become teachers and choreographers, but that's not our aim, that's not our goal for them to become dance teachers and choreographers – we want them to become community dance teachers. This involves the whole community, it's not just about dance, it's about all the problems in the country, how to put that into the dance and try to solve it or not, that's what we are trying to do.

How do you make the first contact to people? Is it easy attract attention, do people hear about Adugna Dance Company in the newspaper or do you go to schools and ask, if they want to join in?

It happens in many ways, sometimes [...] we make announcements after the performance, say we are giving free education, giving free training [...] Sometimes we just go to a group of people who are doing something else, they might be prisoners, they might be street kids [...]. But most of the time we will just go out of Addis Ababa, the capital city, and [...] and collect some [...] kids and old people together and do a big show like what we are doing here. And the show will be about a problem in that town [...]. And people in that town come to see the performance and they ask questions, there will be question-and-answer after the performance: what they learned, what needs to be changed, what we are doing – or rather, they are doing. [...]

And those people you recruit, are they part of an institution? Do you just go somewhere, tell them about a project and eventually they join you? And for which period of time are the projects planned?

[...] There will be fifteen of them maybe working about HIV already, and then you just go to them and ask: do you want to do something different? We'll keep your work, but let's just put something different in it, like contemporary dance or traditional dance [...]. The project will be for one month and at the end of the month they will perform two or three times, that will be it. But we don't stop there, we always go back to visit them, see what they are doing after. There is always a connection between us and those people. We'll ask them to call us or to email each other if they need help, or if we need their help. [...]

And the rehearsals, where do they take place, and where do you have the money from?

The money comes from different [...] Non Government Organizations, and sometimes people will just give us some money to do the projects. The performance can take place anywhere, [...]

Is the Adugna Dance Company well known?

[...] It's the first one and a lot of people really don't know about it, because either they are too old and contemporary dance to them is very strange and something very new, so they don't really know about the company.

Are you really the only Contemporary Dance Group in Ethiopia?

Yes, it's the only contemporary dance company in Ethiopia – not in Africa, but in Ethiopia.

Is Adugna Dance Company a company or a school, or is it both?

It's a company and it's a school, but we don't teach for money. People come to learn for free and we try to find the money [...] from outside Ethiopia [...] contemporary dance it's not really known, and therefore people will not pay for it. Maybe after ten years people will start to pay for it, because they are starting to understand what it means and what it is doing for the community of Ethiopia [...].

And contemporary dance, what is special about it that you think it's important to have it in Ethiopia?

[...] There are a lot of problems to be solved in Ethiopia [...] and if you use the traditional dance to teach about those problems it might not work. People have tried to use that a lot of the time, and it didn't work. Because of the movement and because of the music here you are using, it just didn't work. Since we have contemporary dance in Ethiopia it's just made it very easy and clear for the audience to watch what's our problem, what we need to see here, what it is they are trying to do. It makes it very clear to see in our body language what we are trying to say. [...] But since we started, since Royston started to bring contemporary dance, we have a lot of audiences, we have students who are coming to the company to learn and always the audience translates the piece in their own way. [...]

And what is Adugna Dance Company doing without you while you are in Europe?

[...] We don't go out to teach in Europe at the same time. [...] I can't say there are enough of us in Addis – because there are only fourteen of us and there is only one company, but we are struggling, we are still trying. That's the way we are doing it now, to take over someone else's job.

What are you doing next, as a professional dancer/choreographer?

Well, there are a lot of plans. I want to perform a lot, I want to get myself on stage. And I'll be working on different projects back in Ethiopia. And of course, for these projects I have to find the money, but that's what I am hoping to do.