



**“MY AFRICA IS
ALWAYS IN THE
BECOMING”**

**OUTSIDE THE BOX
WITH FAUSTIN
LINYEKULA**

by Brenda Dixon Gottschild

Backstory

"If there's any politics about my work, it's to put individuals at the center of the discussion rather than treating them like sheep."



© Gael Teicher

Talking one-on-one with Faustin Linyekula makes you realize how much we are led by appearances, and how misleading appearances can be. As is probably the case with so many people he meets (black, white, brown—on whatever continent he may be), this powerful man was exoticized, romanticized by me, based on his appearance. Me, of all people: the Africanist and performance studies scholar who, myself, have been subject to marginalization and invisibilization! It just goes to show that we all share in stereotyping and hold stock in its currency.

I met Faustin Linyekula at a reception for Philadelphia's dance community in the spring of 2007. As a body person, I checked him out from head to toe. Thinking about Robert Farris Thompson's eloquent phrase and book title, *African Art in Motion*, I began to catalog him with that frame of reference in mind. My first impression was of a quite beautiful, somewhat retiring, super-slender young man. Thin as a rail, with wide eyes and a generous mouth in a

face haloed by a black crown of baby dreads and accented, as he spoke, by glowing teeth gapped in front on both bottom and top rows: dressed all in black (as he would be when I interviewed him the following morning), he seemed a wispy sprite who could be wafted away by a strong gust of wind. Yet, there was something serene, solid, grounded, self-possessed about him. Something quiet at the center. His featherweight size rendered him neither hyper nor flighty in personality. He reminded me of another great Congolese dancer: the slight, sinewy Titos Sompá, my teacher in Manhattan in the 1970s. In both cases, once I got to know these men, the lie was put to first impressions. Indeed, this boyish looking man with elfin frame turned out to be a wise old soul—a heavyweight, in fact.

Linyekula writes choreography. I mean to say that his creations are chock full of compound movement "sentences" that often end in ellipses, parentheses, or semicolons, rather than full stops. You may comment that this is true of many postmodern choreographers. I will counter that, like Nigerian author and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, Linyekula was raised in a multi-lingual, multicultural, modern-day African setting and had to learn to maneuver several verbal and somatic languages and thought patterns as a matter of course. He joins a special rank of post-colonial world artists of color who reject the received wisdom about what they should create and how it should be presented. Included in this cadre are dancers like Seydou Boro (Burkina Faso), Kettly Noël (Haiti), and filmmakers like Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania. His film, *Bamako*, was recently shown stateside). This choreographer's work is informed and inflected by growing up in Zaire, which is now the Democratic

Republic of Congo (D.R.C.).

Looks are deceiving; and, for many, our concept of Africa is a lie. The D.R.C.¹ is

one-fourth the size of the United States and supposedly has a population of anywhere from 49 to 60 millions, according to various encyclopedic sources. But who can be sure, with countless millions murdered during decades of upheaval and regime change. Although it claimed independence from Belgium in 1960, the

country has been decimated by political corruption, civil strife, inter-ethnic warring, and poverty—in spite of the fact that the Congo is rife with gold, copper, uranium, diamonds, and other mineral resources as well as hydroelectric power potential. The history is convoluted and intricate, too difficult to explain here in detail. Nevertheless, it is a backdrop that continues to inform Linyekula's life and art. He was raised during the tumultuous dictatorship of Joseph Mobutu (1965-1997) who came to power via a CIA-supported military coup that had ousted Joseph Kasavubu, the country's first elected president. Mobutu created a one-party government and amassed a personal fortune. His 1971 "cultural awareness" program required all citizens with Christian names to drop them and take on African names. Accordingly, passports and birth certificates had to be revoked and rewritten. Baptisms and the wearing of European-style suits were banned ("à bas le costume!"). He changed the name of the country to Zaire and his own to Mobutu Sese Seko. Internal rebellion escalated to

civil war and continued throughout the 1990s. In 1997 Laurent Kabila forced Mobutu to abdicate, declared himself president, and readopted the Democratic

Republic of Congo as the official name of the country. Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and replaced by his son, Joseph, who has been president since then.

Into this morass, Faustin Linyekula was born on February 27, 1974, the same day as tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon. "Magnetic, capable, worldly," are the strengths attributed to those born

on this day, a day which has been termed "the day of the reality masters."² (Indeed, to survive in the Congo, one had to master a reality whose day-to-day danger was surreal.) Due to Mobutu's rule, his Christian name, Faustin, couldn't appear on any official documents until the late 1990s. (Like most of the population, the Linyekula family was Catholic.) By 1991, when he wished to attend college, the regime considered the university a radical hotbed and shut it down. In 1993 Linyekula traveled to Kenya, where he hoped to pursue university studies. There he was first introduced to dance at a theater-movement workshop taught by Alphonse Tierou who was from the Ivory Coast. He made his first choreography in 1997, a collaboration with Kenyan choreographer Opiyo Okach and Afrah Tenambergen which traveled to festivals around the country. In 2001—after eight years away and with Mobutu ousted and a new Kabila in place—Linyekula returned to the Congo and established Les Studios Kabako in Kinshasa.³ He now lives and works in Kisangani. (Now, he could have made



it easy on himself. He could have set up shop in some European locale and become the next new thing on the exotic-erotic block. Instead, Linyekula chose the path of most resistance and returned to work in his homeland.)⁴

Colonialism's Discontents

"The moment you take into account the history of perception, you start realizing that even the image we have of ourselves is shaped by the outside."

"Congo and many African countries are still colonial states. Because a colonial state is one where legitimacy comes from outside, and political legitimacy in the Congo depends on who your 'godfathers' are, outside—in Washington, Paris, or Brussels."

Linyekula makes sense of the complexities of his heritage by using his fierce intellect to interrogate those conditions onstage and in conversation. This young artist bares his convictions in the following astute reflections excerpted from our interview:

[Asked how the presence/absence of race has shaped or figured in his work]

"I didn't see the color of my skin until I started performing in Europe. While growing up, race wasn't a question. When I started reading about South Africa I understood that black people were persecuted on the continent, outside the continent, and even in my own country with colonialism and slavery. But at my own experience level I didn't see the color of my skin. It was only when I started showing my work in Europe. It was like sets of expectations for what you're supposed to do if you are black and

African."

[Regarding how he's perceived in the world]

"It's about how the outside eye—which is the eye of power—what kind of role they want me to play. It's not just a stage [the concert stage] where any story can unfold. Depending on where you come from, your story cannot be told in the same way. That [stage] space is not mutual. It's charged with someone's history that became your history because, *for me, the proscenium theater was part of Congo's culture when I was born.*" Mobutu was the main patron of the Zairian National Theater. [Italics mine. Here Linyekula easily debunks the general conceit that Africans are foreign to European theater conventions.]

[From a question on identity, commenting on what he considers the shortsightedness of national identity as linked up with dance ensembles such as Sekou Touré's National Ballet of Guinea]

"There's never been any reflection on just the stages that we show those dances on. Space is what defines the type of relationships. The proscenium theater is a clear extension of Europe—a colonial stage. You have the space for the monarch and you create the perspective from that angle. You define everything according to this person's eye. The world is organized from his perspective. The moment you take these [African traditional] dances and put them on that stage, and you're saying you're celebrating your national identity, and you don't take into account the question of whose point of view are you constructing it from, then something's wrong from the onset."

[Regarding showing his work in Europe]

"I got certain reactions. One from the *Libération* paper [in Paris] said, "Yes, Faus-

tin has talent, both as dancer and creative artist, but he wastes his talent by refusing to act African.” When I read that, it’s like, “what does it mean?” It helped me enter into a dynamic dialogue with forms—the circle, the proscenium stage—and how do we move through them through time.

“What I realized was it was not enough just to tell my stories. I needed to find strategies to go past all those screens: So, I’m African and supposed to fit into this grid—fine! Yes—sunshine, diseases, and this and that, and that! Then what? Once you’ve gone past that is maybe when my story can begin. How do I play with these expectations—not against them—so that my voice can still be heard? So, when someone says “Africa is [this or that], okay, fine; I respect that you have a definition for Africa. I don’t know what Africa is! My Africa is always in the becoming. It’s not a fixed point, and no identity is fixed.

“Ultimately, I don’t blame anyone for being who they are. We are the children of our times, so if the spaces and times in which this particular journalist grew up form her personality such that she could look at me in that way, I don’t want to fight with her over that! I could waste so much energy trying to respond! I want to use my energy [for my work], and if it doesn’t fit into the image you had of me, too bad. It’s like trying as much as possible to be the source of my own image and not to let that outside gaze influence me....

“Up until that moment it started for me in Europe, I used to think that it was enough for me to just tell my story. Then I realized that I had also to bring into my story the question of how is it perceived—how am I perceived. So if I interrogate that question of perception, even back home, the question becomes, ‘Why do we look at ourselves this way? Who shapes how we look at

ourselves....Why do we do theater the way we do it here? Are we fully aware of what the proscenium stage means, when it was invented?’ The lesson that I learned from the experience in Europe, where suddenly you have all these expectations, was a great one. Suddenly it brought me back to interrogating things and never taking anything for granted.”

Creative Process

“It’s not about improvising but about making present, life-and-death decisions—about being here.”

Linyekula’s work is a fusion of influences balanced on his creative vision. More than dances, he makes theater pieces; his dancers are actors, his stage a dramatic set. The prevailing non-African dance referents in his presentations are more European and expressionist (German, French) in nature than American minimalist. His somatically sophisticated movement style (that freely uses contact improvisation, an American invention) is driven by idea and philosophical concepts. As he puts it, “my understanding of contemporary dance is not so much a technique as an idea....It’s a play with energy.”⁵ Thus, in a work like *Triptyque Sans Titre* (premiered in North America in 2005), the laid-back way of moving, stretching from the Judson Dance Movement of the 1960s through today’s contact improv, is performed with a sobriety and purpose—an intentionality, to use Linyekula’s terminology—that go beyond the decidedly disengaged American postmodern mask to reflect his particular, provocative African contemporary moment. Performing with his small company, Linyekula’s personal movement style is serpentine, quixotic: at times, with the litheness of a pugilist shadow boxing, he moves on his toes. His choreography is anything but

linear or narrative, and the spoken and recorded word, as well as sets and props deployed and maneuvered by the dancers, are integral elements in his stage aesthetic.

Contending that his work is not political, this choreographer/director posits, instead, that his is an oeuvre that questions: “I work with choreographic movement, energy, rhythm, the body and its physical presence—the challenge to remain standing, vertical, in spite of a crushing environment. I am showing the individual in a context where there is no space for individuals....I speak in my own name, not in the name of ‘all Congolese’ or [worse] ‘all Africans.’...I pose the question; ‘What is my space in the middle of all this?’”⁶ Despite the tone of his conversation and the wash of speechmaking in a work such as *Festival of Lies*, Linyekula’s desire is to create work that “goes beyond any partisan political approach to reach some degree of poetry which is the space where you transcend certain political views and where you even acknowledge your own contradictions. A political statement has to be overly self-confident, like ‘I know, and this is how it is.’ I don’t know!”

I asked Linyekula if he were concerned if his audience didn’t understand his intention. He gamely suggested that it’s okay if everything isn’t understood, because in human relationships “we don’t get along with everyone all the time.” Still pursuing this line of thought, I then asked if I’d miss out on anything, being neither a native French

speaker nor Congolese. In responding he showed the wisdom that comes with experience and skilled craftsmanship, regardless of age. He is convinced that it’s important to “accept that there are certain things we just cannot get...If we can just be humble enough to accept that, hey, we can’t control everything, that there’s room for mystery, and it’s important to keep certain things that way and not go and shake all the trees because you don’t know if there’s a snake up there, and maybe we don’t want to enter into contact with that snake.”



Above: *Triptyque sans Titre* © Christine Wilkin
Below: *Spectacularly Empty* © Antoine Tempé

A significant part of his thinking is summed up by a statement he made in the excellent film directed by Joan Frosch and Alla Kovgan, *Movement (R)Evolution Africa: a story of an art form in*

four acts (2007): “How can I work in a form very contemporary but trying to still be a storyteller? Not how to make new out of the old, but how to make the old out of the new? For me it was [the latter]—the other way around.”

Festival of Lies

“We’re getting together to tell lies about ourselves, about our country—but maybe these are the only truths we have about ourselves....I don’t want to make this performance a funeral, so let’s make it a party: we need to feel good to talk about these things. I don’t want anyone to cry, be sad. I just want ‘it’ to stop.”

In a recent “Wizard of Id” cartoon strip, the town crier announces, “Six o’clock and time for lies, distortions, and half truths.” A citizen pokes his head out the window and queries, “What happened to the news?” The crier replies, “This is the news!”⁷ And this is the world that many of us inhabit, to a greater or lesser degree. It is the world of Linyekula’s *Festival of Lies*, in spades. A meditation and journey about history, memory, and nationality, this multimedia work has a European track record: one such venue was the “In Transit” festival at Berlin’s House of World Cultures (2005). I arrived in Germany just in time to miss it, so there’s some poetic justice in having the opportunity to see it and write about it, this time around. *Festival* feels like a continuation of *Triptyque*, an earlier excursion into finding the individual voice, the owned self, amidst the ruins of a devastated community.

In his stated desire to “make the old out of the new,” Linyekula sought the equivalent of a Kinshasa storytelling night for this day and age and came up with two versions of the new work: a two-hour-plus presentation, and an all-night interactive event. He explains that the structure for the extended presentation can be understood as a response to and extension of the pop culture dance and music nights that arose in the 1990s around Ndombolo⁸, a trendy dance form which became so popular that the name for the dance was bestowed upon the musical accompaniment and then extended to the entire event as well (which we can see as comparable to the Mambo phenomenon and “Mambo Nights” in the U.S.A.). Ndombolo evenings “never begin before midnight, but then you have to keep people until morning [because all public transportation ceases at night], and it becomes a situation where, besides the performance, you need to organize the life around the performance—food, drinks,” he

tells me. Thus emerges a new performance genre or, as Linyekula would have it, the old from the new. About the all-nighter, he asserts that it’s as much about the time spent together as the “concert,” and that the performance, as such, merges into and out of the evening itself. He then adds, not only in jest, “I believe in time—it’s the only luxury I can afford.”

The idea for the piece emerged as yet another response to what Linyekula simply terms “this mess,” meaning the state of affairs of his homeland. He was inspired by the work of Luis Sepulveda, a Chilean writer who had been both exiled and imprisoned for his political views in defense of freedom. The idea of communally sanctioned “lies” evolved from the concept in Sepulveda’s book, *My Nephew From America*. The dancers are the Les Studios Kabako ensemble: Linyekula himself, Djodjo Kazadi (trained by Linyekula), Papy Ebotani (a hip-hop neighborhood dancer also trained by Linyekula), and writer/actor Bibish Marie-Louise Mumbu, the female voice that mouths everyday speech and everyman concerns, counterbalancing the pompous, all-male political speeches on the recorded soundscape. At each venue the nuclear ensemble are augmented by local musicians and caterers who supply the food and music for this unusual party. (In fact, they usually find a community of Congolese expatriates wherever they go.) To integrate locals into this event, two days of contact prior to the performance is required, not so much as a rehearsal but more as a time for conversation and to garner collective images and impressions. How does it all come together? As Linyekula explains, “you trust in the moment of encounter.”

I was struck by the savvy deployment of urban cultural detritus in *Festival*: political handbills and garbage dump body parts of broken dolls; and the continuous “garbage”

of the recorded speeches, like radios blasting political messages in the streets during election time. This choreographer is fascinated by artificial light: lamps, lanterns, and strings of light bulbs have all figured in his works. This time, oblong neon lamps are manipulated by the dancers and reconfigure the stage space in the process. Occasionally these lights become performers in their own right: bodies—presences, beyond the level of “prop”—morphed into movement partnership with a particular dancer. It must be stated at the outset that the dance, itself, and the moving of props don’t “represent” anything but what they are. The political speeches we hear are also what they are. It is as though two parallel tracks—recorded



Festival of Lies © Agathe Poupeney

speeches from a political imaginary versus the life of the people present onstage—live side by side, with little overlap. As in “real” life, we share the same space with the dictator, the king, the mayor, but our lives and movements don’t really intersect.

Linyekula’s background in experimental, somatic theater (dating from his days in Kenya) is revealed in some of the stage business: molding faces into “masks” and shaping bodies into “statues”—stock techniques in the avant-garde theater handbook—are put to devastating use. Again, these actions are just actions, with a wide range of interpretations: we are puppets; we are controlled and manipulated, we are not our own voice. Dispassionately, methodically, one dancer “shapes” another as a toilet and squats on him; as a cot and “sleeps” on him. These actions go hand in hand with the voices of the political speechmakers on tape. Moments later,

stripped down to their trunks, panting and sweating (following a section in which they played with both the violence and the forced eroticism of wrestling—all done as statuesque poses), Linyekula suddenly halts the stage action and announces they’ll now stop and get something to drink. Here he is teasing us—playing with spectator expectations about theater conventions, about the proscenium versus the people’s stage, about

self and other, if you will. Bertolt Brecht would be proud. At another point, as in an earlier piece, *Spectacularly Empty*, the performers use picture frames, hand-held, to highlight one body part or another—a head, a leg. While they work, one of the recorded speeches is

mouthed talk about independence.

Linyekula tells his story and finds his voice by interrogating the line of Congolese dictators of the past four decades. In our interview he commented on the fact that “all those who contributed to that [mess], it was strictly a male thing, so when I enter this discussion it’s with the men. They’re the ones who call the shots....Congo is too much of a male-dominated society, and it’s striking to listen to a soundtrack with excerpts of political speeches from the 1960s to date, to realize that there isn’t a single female voice.” The one woman present in the piece is “there to tell the stories of hopes and fears, but not to answer questions.” When I asked how much of the work was improvised, how much choreographed, he launched into a politicized, though personal, response, claiming that every Congolese is, by necessity, an improviser. “We don’t know what tomorrow’s made of, not even

where the next meal will come from, because you need to improvise to get to that. Improvisation comes as a state of being and the only way to survive. You make plans, but they never go beyond a certain point in time....Death is so much a part of our lives that you can't project yourself too far in the future. If you want to survive, you need to know how to improvise."

Nevertheless, I pursue this line of questioning to try to ascertain the ratio of choreography to improvisation, just in this work. To this Linyekula responds that he lays out principles and, as in his homeland, he pursues improvisation within tight parameters: "Even in our improvisation back home, the rules are very strict. You know that, in real life, if you're ill and taken to the hospital, you need to improvise on how to find your \$20 to get a consultation and to get malaria treatment. If you don't have that, the rule is clear: no one will treat you, and you'll die. You know that if you meet an army guy on a corner and you're alone, the rule is, you either give money or run. So you improvise, but the rules are clear.

"Onstage I have very strict, clear rules, because otherwise you'll die, your house will fall apart. The rules could have to do with defining for instance how you breathe through a certain sequence. I might determine that through that sequence we only move while breathing out. Those sequences are set, though the movement inside them can change. But, actually, the shapes of lines are defined as well. So, for example, always starting with the head, as if I were moving out of my spine, but only when breathing out or in. It's also a question of rethinking how we write choreography, because why should it mean that choreographing a piece means fixing steps? And if it's not that, it's improvised? NO!!! Again, that's a very colonial way of looking at dance, framing dance."

With this explanation I realize that I've framed the question in the wrong terms, in "outsider" or "othering" terms—Eurocentric terms that I've internalized as part of my own African-American fusion culture but clearly aren't the appropriate referent to frame Linyekula's aesthetic and cultural understanding. Everything is relative. Take nothing for granted. Some dance makers work between and beyond the categories we have named for them: they play, create, and dream outside the box.

Coda

"I begin by saying it's an attempt to remember my name. The intention is very clear."

He doesn't fit the box. Choreography? Improvisation? Theater? Performance Art? Installation? Dance? Hmmmm....He is also not an "African dancer." According to Linyekula "When you take those two words together, for most people, the stress is more on the word 'African' than on the word 'dancer,' because of the stereotypes and all that. The day that both words will be put on the same level, maybe then I can talk of myself as an African dancer."

Salmon Rushdie said somewhere that immigration is the great story of the century. Faustin Linyekula said somewhere, "Perhaps my only true country is my body."

Notes

1. Information in this section gleaned from the following internet sources: www.flashpoints.info/countries-conflicts; www.rulers.org; www.imdb.com; www.exchangezones.com/page409.htm.
2. Gary Goldschneider and Joost Elffers, *The Secret Language of Birthdays*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994, pp.766-767.
3. "Kabako" is the name of a dear friend of Linyekula's who died in Uganda and is buried amongst strangers, far away from home.
4. His choice parallels that of the late, great Katherine Dunham who, during the riots of the 1960s, gave up the relative ease of living and working in New York City. She went to the trenches to create hope and beauty with the economically disadvantaged African American youth of the East St. Louis "hood."
5. Elissa Hunter, "Meet Faustin Linyekula," *The Gainesville Sun*, September 8, 2005
5. Singer, Toba. "An Interview with Studio Kabako's Faustin Linyekula." Ballet-dance magazine. September, 2005, San Francisco. <<http://www.ballet-dance.com/200510/articles/Linyekula20050900.html>>
7. Jeff Parker, "Wizard of Id," *International Herald Tribune*, August 8, 2007, p.19.
8. A widespread popular music/dance form known as (Congolese) Rhumba had taken hold in the 1950s and 1960s and was the forerunner of Ndombolo.

About the Author

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Professor Emerita of Dance Studies, Temple University, is an author and Dance Magazine senior advising editor and performs with her husband, choreographer Helmut Gottschild. Her most recent book is *The Black Dancing Body* (Palgrave paperback, 2005).



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This essay has been commissioned by *The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium*, a coalition of 11 diverse arts institutions, designed to initiate, develop and sustain a dynamic exchange of arts and ideas between artists, arts organizations and public communities throughout the United States and the African continent.

Festival of Lies 2007 US Tour

Produced by MAPP International Productions as a project of
The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium

Philadelphia Live Arts Festival

Philadelphia, PA
September 13-15

REDCAT

Los Angeles, CA
October 24-27

Walker Art Center

Minneapolis, MN
November 1-3

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

San Francisco, CA
November 8-10

Dance Theater Workshop at BRIC

New York, NY
November 14-17

VSA Arts of New Mexico

Albuquerque, NM
November 23-24

On The Boards

Seattle, WA
November 29- December 1

For more information contact:
Cathy Zimmerman, Co-Director & Producer
MAPP International Productions
140 Second Avenue, Suite 502
New York, NY 10003
646.602.9390
cathy@mappinternational.org