

Crossing Boundaries and Creating New Work:  
a story of *120 M/h*  
by Nadia Beugre, Michel Kouakou and Daudet Glazaï  
and  
The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium

by Joan Frosch  
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## Childhood Friends

The choreographic work-in-progress, *120 M/h* is rooted in the childhood friendship of three Ivorian dancer/choreographers, Nadia Beugre, Michel Kouakou and Daudet Glazaï. After years of disparate work and international touring, their early friendship was reignited at the Paris choreographic meetings sponsored by Cultures France (Danse L'Afrique, Danse!) in June 2006. The encounter provoked them to question "distance, route, time . . . modulated by the events of their lives," they asked "How can we represent time? Can we separate time from space? Is time not the space in movement? And what about the distance between bodies and ideas? How can we represent it?" The friends-- now mature practitioners-- acknowledged the power of lives that had taken many turns and to decided to create a work which "...invites them to look inside themselves and examine their common past" (*120 M/h* Press Materials, October 2008).

Currently, Michel lives between New York and Abidjan, dancing with Reggie Wilson; Daudet lives in and works from Paris; and Nadia, who lives in Abidjan, now also spends extended time in Dakar after the sudden death in February 2007 of her partner and artistic collaborator, Beatrice Kombe. In addition to geography, the artists have overcome loss, illness and financial challenge to jumpstart the dream of this choreography-beyond-boundaries. Their fierce desire to co-create and to lay "the first stone" of a project built of a shared Ivorian past

to create a more stable future (i.e., a school) for contemporary dance in Cote d'Ivoire remained steadfast. Their goals deeply resonated with The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium who partnered with Nadia, Michel and Daudet to clear a place for “the first stone” of the creative process.

## An Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium Story

The story of the inaugural creative residency of the trio also tells a story of the Consortium, showing how the research, commitment over time, communication and creativity of this diverse U.S. network functions in partnership with African artists.

In 2001, two Consortium members, Ken Foster of Yerba Buena Performing Arts Center and Joan Frosch of the University of Florida, collaborated to bring to the U.S. a company that had—independently—reinvented their conceptions of contemporary dance. That company was the all-women Ivorian ensemble, Compagnie TchéTché, directed by Beatrice Kombe, which prominently showcased Nadia Beugre's “force of nature” performance power. Ken recalled his initial impressions of TchéTché:

Several years ago, I found myself at a contemporary dance festival in Europe. The festival was a celebration largely of artists from that particular region of Europe. As often happens at festivals of this nature, I found much of the work uninteresting. After several days, frustrated and bored by what I was seeing, I saw that I had the chance to see a company from Africa called TchéTché. The company was completely unknown to me but I went anyway with the thought that at least it wasn't going to be any more regional European dance.

The theatre was quite small and the crowd similarly so – the company was up against several European companies with bigger names and presence. But no one could have had a bigger experience than I did that evening. For the next forty minutes Beatrice Kombe and Compagnie TchéTché presented “Dimi–Women's Sorrow” and what followed was without question one of the three or four greatest art experiences of my lifetime. With live music and the fierce, uncompromising dance style of Beatrice and Nadia, I was completely mesmerized by the performance. At the end, after a stunned silence, the audience literally leapt to its feet, applauding madly for the artistic revelation that had just occurred. I stood there myself, tears streaming down my face, emotionally wrung out by what had just happened. TchéTché introduced me to a whole genre of dance that I was unfamiliar with—and in the years since I have spent much time and energy learning more about contemporary dance from Africa and finding ways to bring that dance to my communities in the U.S. But no experience can, I think, ever match that first time that I encountered the artistry and the power of the work of Compagnie TchéTché. It is an experience I will never forget. (Personal Communication, 12/24/08)

Joan first encountered Compagnie TchéTché at their 2000 Montpellier performance and was subsequently inspired to create the international conference/festival “Movement (R)Evolution Dialogues” (2004), and the documentary film “Movement (R)Evolution Africa” (2007).

TchéTché's performance so startlingly rocked me, including the unforgettable realization that I had never, ever seen women—anywhere—move with such daring and physicality, I was catapulted into a new area of the research in dance I had conducted in Africa and the United States for almost thirty years at that point (since 1973). ([www.movementrevolutionafrica.com](http://www.movementrevolutionafrica.com), 12/24/08).

The company became good friends of Joan's program at the University of Florida and returned numerous times for residencies, and to collaborate on plans for the development of infrastructures for and documentation of contemporary performance in Africa.

In 2006, under the joint leadership of Cathy Zimmerman and Ann Rosenthal at MAPP, The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium sponsored a ten-city national tour of TchéTché. Consortium member Alicia Adams of the Kennedy Center presented the premiere performance of the tour, Philip Bither of the Walker Art Center and Vivian Phillips of Seattle Theatre Group brought TchéTché to their communities with performances and engagement activities, and the tour culminated in San Francisco at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Consortium member Marj Neset of VSA Arts New Mexico/North Fourth Art Center presented the company during the national tour, and hosted a Thanksgiving dinner for the group. During this time she got to know Nadia as a member of the company, and later got to know Michel when he toured to Albuquerque with Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group. The strength and talent of both Nadia and Michel appealed to Marj.

On the Consortium's research trip to the 7th Biennial of the Africa and Indian Ocean Choreographic Encounters Festival in Tunis in May 2008 (sponsored by Ness El Fen/Tunis in cooperation with CulturesFrance), Marj was particularly moved to see Nadia return to performance after a year of battling for her health and the soul-shaking loss of partner Beatrice Kombe. Marj reported being touched by the sheer fun and conviviality of the relationship of the two old friends—Nadia and Michel—and also by how healing it seemed for Nadia to be “back on the dance scene.”



After a series of compelling face-to-face meetings with African choreographers (including Nadia) on-site in Tunis, the Consortium decided to allocate funds for Nadia Beugre, Michel Kouakou, and Daudet Glazaï to jumpstart their creative process. That is how these emerging choreographers from Cote d'Ivoire came to conduct a four-week creative residency at Bates Dance Festival, July 10-Aug 6, 2008. Referring to fellow Consortium member and traveler Laura Faure of Bates Dance Festival, Marj recalled:

When Laura brought up the idea of them working together at Bates . . . well timing is everything. We (VSA) had just received a modest, entirely unexpected, windfall from one of our funders that we had to spend by the end of the fiscal year. So . . . voila! Sometimes life works, and art and money meet painlessly. So our funder supported the completion of stage 1 of a project we will eventually present, we hope. (Personal Communication, 11/30/08).

About their time at Bates, Laura reported:

During their residency they participated in classes (Contact Improvisation, Modern technique and Yoga), held daily rehearsals to develop a new work; gave two informal performances as part of our weekly studio showing; led a workshop for our Youth Arts Program (70 kids ages 6-17); and participated in weekly roundtable discussions and other informal activities.

They were a total delight to have in our midst. They jumped right into our community of dancers and swam along happily. They worked very hard and developed a good bit of strong material that still requires some shaping to become a piece. An outside eye would be very helpful at this point. They made many connections with Festival musicians and dancers and contributed their particular African perspective to our conversations.

As they worked and were fed by the creative environment, they got very excited and cooked up some very ambitious ideas that included building a new center for dance in Abidjan; bringing two Bates Dance Festival musicians to Abidjan to work on their piece and tour with them; and doing a national tour of the U.S. We tried to offer some grounding in reality but they were pretty determined. I think the most important thing to come from their residency was the chance for them to fulfill a dream of creating together. As childhood friends, they have a strong bond together and their work is, in part, about this bond. I also think this opportunity helped to bring Nadia back into dance and into a new path forward after a very difficult period of loss.

## Loss and . . . Found

In deep conversations with Nadia during her Bates residency, Joan, who was Bates' scholar-in-residence, understood Nadia's quest for the trio as one that would simultaneously move Nadia into the future and into the past, healing precious moments of her present in a world so shattered by loss. Nadia was full of humor and pathos, and grateful, along with Michel and Daudet, for the chance to birth the dream of this collaboration.

The Consortium network coalesced in creative forces and resources to provide a foundation that was able to respond quickly and effectively to a great drive to create. The fertile mix of commitment to research, documentation, networking, sharing, and communication-- not only presenting work-- creates the productive ground of the group's endeavors and its foundation for future relationships with African contemporary artists.

While finances remain a challenge, the trio plans to reconvene in Abidjan in summer 2009 and hopes, in time, to premiere the work there. Meanwhile, during the Consortium's January 2009 meeting at APAP, we agreed to help support Michel Koukou to attend Germaine's workshop in spring 2009 so that he, Nadia and Daudet may again work together on the piece. The Consortium, with support from the NEA, will cover Michel's international travel and members Laura Faure (Bates Dance Festival) and Marj Neset (VSA Arts/North Fourth Art Center) will again contribute additional funds to cover Michel's per diem costs.

Onward.

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