

“Only the sky will stop me”

African Women Changing Contemporary Dance: Kettly Noël, Nelisiwe Xaba, and Mamelela Nyamza

By Joan Frosch

Where do we begin the conversation about the extraordinary contemporary dance movement afoot in Africa and some of its stellar young leaders? Will entrenched biases distort even fresh discussions about the continent? Better to be frank.



Nelisiwe Xaba & Kettly Noël

Disaster-driven Western media rehearses distortion nowhere more consistently than in its coverage of Africa. If reported on at all, the media depicts the continent most persistently by a faceless humanity who consumes aid and offers little in return, ever engulfed by poverty, illiteracy, war, environmental degradation, HIV/AIDS, and/or political turmoil. Let's face it: the disaster-bias takes its toll. While neither intentionally malevolent nor without basis, these images do harm. It is not because negative images are presented, but that they are repeated over and over as if disaster were the only story worth telling about Africa, to the exclusion of the myriad of untold African stories. The economic and social penalties to the continent embed themselves broadly, for example: in approaches to international aid, formulation of foreign policy, business investment, even artistic exchange. Of further consequence is that the negativity numbs the curiosity—for many—about this vast and diverse continent, further perpetuating the endemic Western ignorance about Africa.

Foreign and internal views of Africans as keepers of unchanging traditions—except for political expediency as in the case of the former Zaire's Mobutu—have, on some occasions, combined to undermine recognition of African artistic agency. The very notion of African experimentalism has been rendered an oxymoron, if not downright “un-African.” It is such a view that some African governments have used to foster an “authentic” Africanity in service of ideology, most recently in post-apartheid South Africa, for example when choreographer Gregory Maqoma's work was rejected for a public ceremony because it did not adequately project the governmentally constructed African ideal. Such thinking is not dissimilar to the outsider's view that African artistic innovation must mean the destruction of “real” African culture. If African culture is to be determined by cheeky foreign critics, as occurred in the cases of Faustin Linyekula (Democratic Republic of Congo), and others, some continental choreographers' work is simply judged “not African enough.”

If lesser souls would scamper, many African choreographers, driven by a fierce determination to create, are unafraid to confront such challenges head-on. In fact, in acts of artistic alchemy, they appear to transform the energy of Africa's contemporary tensions, disruption, and social confrontations into the rich fodder of an intricate and complex artistic environment. In the flux of rapidly changing social and cultural milieus, previously untold stories pour forth to cut a

growing choreographic swath of new expression in today's Africa. These choreographers' powerful voices express hearts and minds in an emergent feast of visual mind/body/emotion invention impossible to ignore. African artists are building an art form, a field, and a public all at once, along with a new history of contemporary dance. Their voices as societal provocateurs and innovators challenge the norms and pressures of both internal and external dominance. They are 21st century dance pioneers. In this essay you will meet several of the "better half" of them.

Indeed, the small but extraordinary cadre of women currently moving towards the fore of the field is a critical development in the unfolding narrative of contemporary dance in Africa, and its reach to global markets, such as our own in the United States. As the international touring phase of the emergent African contemporary movement began to grow out of the early French interventions in the 1990's, two woman artists would soon introduce American audiences to their ingenuity. While South Africa's long-time innovator Robyn Orlin had toured the United States extensively starting in the 1990s, in 2000, Jant Bi (Senegal) the became first Francophone African contemporary dance company headed by a woman to tour extensively in the United States. Germaine Acogny, artistic director of the all-male company, toured Jant Bi with controversial *Le Coq est Mort*. Acogny continues to tour a succession of new works for the company and her own solo work. Béatrice Kombé, artistic director of the all-female company Tchétché (Côte d'Ivoire) broadly toured her works *Sans Repère*, *Geomé*, and *Dimi* in the United States in 2002, 2005, and 2006 respectively, ending with Kombé's tragic death in 2007. Despite these trendsetters, women choreographers—many of whom use the stage as a sounding board that no other platform appears to offer—remained a minority in the continental contemporary dance scene, even in South Africa, whose dance history, like its national history, is distinct from that of the continent.

But change is in sight: many African women's stories are burgeoning with life, and, apparently, impossible to contain from spilling onto the stage. Out from under the burden of social pressure to conform to certain roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, sometimes combined with the parameters of women's self-determination in traditions, or in religious affiliations with Christianity or Islam, brave innovators have asserted their identities. Not only as artists and choreographers, they have quickly taken up the work of directors, activists, teachers, and/or cultural leaders in their communities, as well. To move against the tide, these women's pathways appear to at least double-up the requirement for creative courage.

Notable women choreographers such as Hella Fattoumi (Tunisia/France), Nora Chipaumire (Zimbabwe/United States), Sophia Kossoko (Benin/France), among others, continue to source their African experience as the center of their work even as they have committed to living abroad for the long term. However, a growing group of women who transverse as gracefully across cultures as any 21st century artist have committed to building on the ground in Africa. In spite of isolation, economic instability, the tasks of developing infrastructure, and the inherent risks of challenging the status quo, Kettly Noël (Haiti/Mali), Nelisiwe Xaba (South Africa), Mamela Nyamza (South Africa), Maria Helena Pinto (Mozambique), and Bouchra Ouizguen (Morocco), to name but a few, have taken on the challenge. Nadia Beugré (Côte d'Ivoire), who had planned with Béatrice Kombé to build the field from their home in Abidjan, now lives between France and Senegal, her home torn apart by Kombé's death, and the war and economic devastation: the empty space of her loss now fodder for her work. Kettly Noël (Haiti/Mali), Nelisiwe Xaba (South Africa), and Mamela Nyamza (South Africa) graciously agreed

to share some of their personal histories with me and, to paraphrase Mamela Nyamza, I am ever more convinced that as African women fly forth in contemporary dance, they can only be stopped by the sky (2011).

Mamela Nyamza, based in Cape Town, studied ballet since the age of 8—and recalls arriving for her first class in a swimsuit. 26 years later, upon the award of the 2011 Standard Bank Young Artist Award Winner for Dance, she was praised as a “multiple award-winning dancer, choreographer, dance teacher, passionate development activist and motivational speaker” (<http://www.standardbankarts.com/NationalArts/Young-Artist-Of-The-Year-Mamela-Nyamza.aspx>). Indeed, Mamela was drawn to her creative path for multiple reasons: spiritual fulfillment, her love of movement and awe of its ability to transcend, and the pressing needs of a society in transition:

“I wanted to talk about women’s real issues, when it comes from a woman’s perspective it becomes powerful especially when you have walked some of the paths....Creating my own work was a better option for me...to tell my own stories and other women’s issues.”

Mamela pointed out that the instability of funding has led many artists to leave African countries and work abroad. In 2008, she was a contestant on the popular British version of the TV show, ‘So You Think You Can Dance (Superstars of Dance)’. She competed with her brilliant reinvention of *The Dying Swan* for which she received a FNB Vita Dance Umbrella Award in 2000. The work is a raw look at the stuttering vulnerability of life, even the life of the unassailable and classic beauty, unmasked by artifice. When I viewed the faces of the TV judges’ reactions, it was clear that they could not wrap their heads around a black artist, not only dancing, but daring to appropriate a ballet archetype for her own interpretation. In spite of Mamela’s stunning work and performance, it did not qualify her to move forward in the competition, but it firmly advanced her resolve to further the honesty and realness of her craft.

Mamela’s work has grown from roots deep in her childhood growing up in a large family:

“Growing up in Gugulethu with a huge family did not give me a choice but to love dancing. There is music and sound, all day long, and even in the streets the noise became the music...I used my body as the instrument to react to all forms of sound, whether it be playing, crying, or watching all sorts of things that one can imagine happened in Gugulethu in the 80’s.”

(<http://www.standardbankarts.com/NationalArts/Young-Artist-Of-The-Year-Mamela-Nyamza.aspx>)

While never intended as literal portrayals, Mamela’s work has also grown out of women’s experiences—including family members’ and her own personal experiences, if not trauma. Mamela is fearless and goes to the heart of pain in an effort to expose, and to heal. “These issues are not being solved,” Mamela lamented.

Mamela decided to tackle a particularly abhorrent encounter designed to terrorize lesbians in a patriarchal society. It is known as “corrective rape,” and it is on the rise in South Africa. According to Luleki Sizwe, a local organization which assists women who have been raped, “More than ten lesbians per week are raped or gang-raped in Cape Town alone” (BBC Jun 29,

2011). Thirty-one lesbian women were reported to have died from these attacks in the last ten years (BBC Jun 29, 2011).

Mamela has taken on rape and other issues by unpacking “real situations using real time” to say “something powerful” to foment real emotion, and another way to view, if not halt these tragedies. Again upending convention by appropriating and reinventing for a cause, she described “becoming the man in my recent work playing the good, the bad and the victim.” Mamela is committed to telling the story differently, differently enough so that people will listen. Mamela reflected, “I would like other women to go out there [and] share their own stories in their works to heal themselves and, in return, heal others. They must not be afraid to express their art.”

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, choreographer Kettly Noël began her study of dance at the age of 17. In Haiti, she performed broadly, including with visual artist, Junior Mario, in video montage. Kettly studied economics but ultimately chose dance as her life work. Or, perhaps, dance chose her. In the early 1990s she traveled to Paris to immerse herself in theater, film, music, and television, and choreographed her first work, *Nanlakou* (June 1995). The work was to provide an underpinning for her future choreography typified by what was to become a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach to creation.

Soon after the creation of *Nanlakou*, Kettly choreographed the music video *Agolo* for Benin singer Angélique Kidjo. The experience woke her up...to Africa. In the summer of 1996, Kettly moved with her family to Benin. “Upon my arrival in Cotonou (Benin) I sought to understand what I do. In order to understand, I teach.” Thus she began to work with young people in contemporary dance, unpacking and examining her own choreographic development-in-action; a number of her students went on to craft careers in dance.

Beginning anew in Mali in late 1999, Kettly began to shape an infrastructure for the development of dance in Mali. She created Donko Seko, a dance center in Bamako. In addition to developing serious dance training for dancers and for youth, she developed strong outreach programs for the greater community. In 2003, she created “Danse Bamako Danse,” the first international festival of contemporary dance in Bamako. In 2010, Kettly hosted “Danse l’Afrique Danse,” the biennial pan-African choreographic competition, an epic international undertaking.

As Kettly continues to develop her personal voice, she describes herself as travelling “into dark areas in search of light.” Always deeply personal, her work is ever part of herself, her questions, fears, and desires. Simultaneously, her work crosses boundaries to take on larger dimensions interrogating issues of identity, and “the fight for the position of women on the continent.” Thus Kettly’s work is prismatic, one light illuminating ever-deeper portraits of society. Indeed, Kettly has made great inroads on the continent to encourage women to move beyond what they may consider possible to achieve at the present time. She explains, “I would very much like to see the youngest women take possession of the contemporary space...to step forth strong and firm...to take more risks.”

Ironically, in the early days after her move to Bamako (Mali), she recalls that some people mistook her for a man, given that only a man might so boldly talk about and dance in this transgressive new world of contemporary dance. Kettly recalled another sort of confusion of observers: western women have, at times, (mis)interpreted that it is she who has been

personally beaten or abused in her life when she has dealt with such issues in her works. Not so. Rather, Kettly takes the whole of women's experience to draw upon in her work—for it is an experience all women own together.

Nelisiwe Xaba who lives in Johannesburg, but was born in Soweto, recollected her entry into dance:

"I started dancing during the political uprisings in the late 80s. This is when formal schooling in Soweto was interrupted, the youth was rioting, throwing stones, fighting for liberation. So when I started dancing it was to find something constructive, something where I could spend my energy positively. At that time young people were stimulated to destroy government structures and white businesses, as a way of agitating politicians. And some of that was to our detriment. Some of it went against us because we were also destroying infrastructure that was vital to our everyday existence. So I had to find something intimate, elegant, something less aggressive..."

"So dance was a way of getting out of the streets, and a way to focus and invest in a... future. At that time I was not thinking, 'I need to tell a story'; at that time I wasn't thinking, 'I need to address issues of feminism, I need to address racial issues.' Politics were such a part of my everyday life that I wanted to dance, I wanted to be free. It was around the time of the American TV series 'Fame,' we wanted to dance badly."

From as young as Neli can recall, she was politically conscious: issues of feminism, racism, and religion were rooted in her consciousness, emergent, and quick to develop. "For me having been born in Soweto one was forced to be political, it wasn't something I had to learn, it wasn't something outside of me," she explained. By now she feels, "I've spent my life fighting for equality and freedom." Neli continued, "For me to realize that in dance or in art I still have to continue with the fight that I was fighting socially, is mind-boggling. In the future I would like to see more fierce, strong and confident women, women who are not afraid." In spite of the fact she has seen so many advancements for women across society, including to positions of power, she described herself as "still worried about the younger generation's future!"

Neli recalled being drawn to unpack the story of Sarah Baartman, otherwise known as "Hottentot Venus." Neli reclaimed the humanity of this inhumanely exotified South African woman internationally displayed as a museum exhibit. In so doing, Neli created a space for herself to emerge as a South African artist also caught in the continuing 21st century web of international trade in performance. Typically for Neli, she reached beyond her comfort zone. She engaged a designer whose thinking delighted and challenged her own. Symbolic of Baartman's long-displayed and legendarily oversized genitalia, Carlo Gibson (Strangelove) created a "skirt." Neli described it as a "monster [which] had so many beautiful possibilities. I started to ask myself how I'd manage with the skirt. How to tell the skirt what to do? Actually what became interesting for me was how my body had to manage with this object. That's always my interest: how my body has to manage with the objects, with the props; and then in that process my body finds a new language."

In the harsh economic and social realities of Africa's artists, women face an "...enormous battle, indeed," according to French-Togolese journalist and cultural commentator, Ayoko Mensah. "Their commitment is very strong because through them, it's really the evolution of African women that is at stake... It is vital that those artists have a certain visibility that will allow others

to assert themselves more easily.” Mensah confirms, “Those artists carry the word and they facilitate a recognition of (Africa’s) new women.” Indeed, while Kettly Noël, Nelisiwe Xaba, and Mamela Nyamza usher in new ways of seeing and understanding Africa—and African women—their goals are broader still. These exceptional women see themselves as part of the whole world, not the “third world,” and, while proudly women of Africa, they refuse to be marginalized as such. As Germaine Acogny passionately stated, “I sincerely believe that this is only the beginning...We are bringing a new breath to dance.”

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