

Teacher Lot Siebe on diversity in the Bachelor of Dance in Education.

# The long white wash

Interview by Hester van Hasselt

**Germaine Acogny's period as Artist in Residence is part of an ongoing process of change that started in the Bachelor of Dance in Education five years ago. Could you give a little background to this process?**

Amsterdam Southeast and New West [districts with a relatively high population of immigrant origin. ed.], bringing in new visiting lecturers from a wider variety of backgrounds and of course through the AIRs Nita Liem and Germaine Acogny.

about the focus on African rather than Indonesian dance, for example. But Germaine Acogny is not about African dance as such. Hers is a mixture of contemporary African and Western dance traditions. Dancers from all over the world come together at her dance

Fumni Adewole. They had a big impact on our way of thinking about the meaning of social and informal dance cultures.

Sommers was very explicit in the way she invited us to contrast Dutch reality with the reality in the United States. She sees the US as a land of immigrants, from its very beginnings. People there think in terms of immigration, migration and shifting styles. And you see that reflected in dance culture. She sees the Netherlands, on the other hand, as having a largely monocultural orientation. She looked into the issues of how we could integrate new influences in the training.

'Interculturality', 'diversity': what awful terms they are. Just what is it we're talking about here? I reckon the important thing is that you become aware that Western identity is just as much a cultural identity as any other and not a standard that should be applied elsewhere in the world. What you perceive as yourself is a framework, a label that you accept, and reproduce, and value.

**So you're saying people need to re-examine things they take as given?**

Funmi Adewole, a Nigerian living and working in London, believes it's all about asking yourself the question 'Why is this different from me, or why is this relevant for me'. It all starts by

**How have students responded to the AIRs?**

In the documentary on Nita Liem's AIR project, *Move in a Modern World*, you can see just how great the resistance is among some students. They say they don't want to be guinea pigs. They're happy to participate, but only if there's a guaranteed benefit.

Students often arrive here with very clear-cut ideas about dance, aesthetics and what they want to learn. And when you start tinkering with the schedule, they feel threatened. The students are highly motivated, and we don't want to do anything to change that. But this course isn't a factory for rolling out standardised, ready-made products. Students don't always realise that an educational course is always developing. Sally Sommers has been teaching for 35 years. She said she has seldom come across an institution that has maintained a single direction, which means that students are never in a stable situation.

Students are concerned about losing their technique, and that was an issue in this case. The regular curriculum was put on pause and replaced by, in the words of one of the students, 'a bit of jumping up and down'. You see them caricaturing things that are foreign to them. Only at the end of the block did they realise that their technique has come on a long way.

lectively in almost all her lessons. That's not something our students are used to. Dance lessons are almost exclusively individual processes that ultimately prioritise the excellence of the individual performance. When you work with the mirror, you place a strong focus on the external form, the outside, an idealised construct of yourself. But in Germaine's lessons, the curtains are drawn over the mirrors. You start the lesson as a group – in a circle or by walking around the studio space together.

The idea is that you can transcend yourself in the collective, that you can extend your own boundaries, that you can be galvanised by the energy of the group to bring out the best in yourself. So collectivity is another route to excelling on a personal level. Germaine is fantastic. In the final lesson, during an improvisation with the musicians, she invited the students to step out of the group one by one. You could see the students rising above themselves; the energy of a group dancing like that is really stirring. They are well trained physically; they have this immense potency that you see blossoming in a situation like that. Some of them remained highly subtle and sensitive in their movements despite the explosive level of energy.

**So the students changed their mind, then?**



Jopie de Groot's arrival as the artistic director of dance teacher training meant diversity became an important point of focus here. Among some communities of immigrant descent, if you are intending to follow a professional training programme in higher education people say, 'You're going into the long white wash.' And this applies to our department, too, because conceptually its framed entirely in the Western tradition. We've tried to change this bit by bit by introducing new selection procedures, working together with secondary schools in

**Why did you choose for these two women?**

Nita Liem from Don't Hit Mama was the first AIR in our department. We invited Nita because of her unique approach to theater making. For example, she took students on a guided tour of places that matter in her artistic context, places from the urban dance culture.

Nita Liem led us to Germaine Acogny, who has taught students and teachers at the course for short periods over the last year. Some students wondered

school in Senegal. She wants to break out of the conceptual framework and shake up ideas about identity through encounters with other people – other kinds of people.

**I understand that an interesting discussion on this subject developed during Nita Liem's tenure as AIR?**

As part of her residency, Nita invited along two theoreticians: American dance historian Sally Sommers and African English dance researcher

asking 'Who am I, what defines my art, and what is my culture?' Adewole says that we at the academy seem to think we have no culture, that culture is something only other people have – the people in the clubs or the Surinamese along the road – and that we aren't 'exotic' or 'ethnic'. But Adewole points out that we actually have a very strong indigenous culture and history. And you have to understand your own history in order to relate to others – you have to understand the similarities and differences, because only then can you create common ground.

**Can you explain what you consider so unique about Acogny's work?**

Germaine's method is marked by a rhythmic use of the spine. It is unique. It is not a technique you'll find in any other movement discipline, not even in the martial arts. The spine is often viewed as a static column, but the moment you introduce movement into it, it has far-reaching effects on the entire body – affecting the internal organs and radically altering body awareness. Also, students worked together col-

In the end, the students were unanimously wildly enthusiastic. They experienced an unprecedented sense of freedom and transcended their physical and mental boundaries. They entered a world that was new to them and had to struggle and conquer themselves. Here, they found out that they could do much more than they realised. This was a huge benefit for the students, it's exactly the sort of thing you want training to achieve. Sally Sommer was absolutely right when she said, 'Why do you think you have to give up tradition for experiment?'



You should do both in your life! You are grounded and you learn something new!

**I heard that Acogny also went along to a secondary school in Southeast Amsterdam.**

Patrick Acogny, Germaine's son, gave master classes at the AHK and two workshops for pupils at the Bijlmer Open Comprehensive (OSB). We've been working with the school for the last four years. Our third-year students taught the 14, 15 and 16-year-olds. Students always dread it beforehand. This time, Patrick Acogny kicked it off in an incredibly noisy gym full of 55 school kids. He walked in and his presence and charisma had an immediate effect. Even at the OSB, where many pupils are of immigrant heritage, having an African man as a guest teacher is something.

Patrick worked with elements from social dance traditions. For instance, he separated students into two groups of girls and boys and placed them opposite each other. Then he got them to dance for each other. Of course he knew that this would create a huge level of solidarity between the girls, and they clapped and encouraged each other. Patrick plays with the group and manages to bring out the individuals in the end. He doesn't want people to disappear into the group! In the end he even got one

Patrick grew up in Africa but has lived and worked in Europe for the last 25 years, mostly in Brussels and England. And he recently obtained his doctorate in Paris. His comment, 'I am more European than you are,' was dynamite. It helped the students realise to what extent they had been viewing him exclusively as an African.

**And to what extent were the teaching staff involved?**

Investment in teaching staff at the course is crucial for processes of change in the department. All the teachers and advanced students worked with Germaine whenever she was here. Actually, that was the most remarkable part of this whole AIR period, because students and teachers were together in the lesson and the classical dance teacher was next to the modern dance teacher, and they were all doing something totally foreign to them. Germaine is hugely charismatic and she's able to reach out to very different kinds of people and inspire them. She handles people's backgrounds in dance and physical abilities with great respect, but she's very demanding at the same time. Everyone there was just slogging away, everybody felt as clumsy and ridiculous as one another, but they still all went for it 100 per cent. And this is perhaps the most vitally

your own tradition is being undervalued. The challenge is to know to what extent you are able to open up and take onboard new things coming at you, almost in a playful way. We don't want teachers to dispense with tradition – training in Western techniques is equally important and valuable. But everyone needs to realise that from the moment you make a connection with 'the other', the values and norms at the foundations of these traditions are not shockproof.

Most of the teachers participated very actively in Germaine Acogny's programme. The question they are now asking themselves is, 'How do I connect this new information with my practice?' This is least problematic for modern dance teachers. But it's an almost irresolvable issue for teachers in a specific style such as jazz or classical, which involve a matching didactic method. The structure of a classical ballet lesson is so rigid that once you introduce changes, one could argue that it loses its identity as such.

This triggers a variety of questions. Should teachers teach a specific dance style or use their own expertise as a departure point for teaching dance? What alternatives are there to thinking and teaching in genres? If you want to thrive in the professional

Maria Wüst, the programme director of studies for the Master of Education in Arts discusses cultural diversity in teacher training.

# Expectations are traps

1. The Divers symposium took place on 21 January 2010, and was followed up by the publication of 'Divers, Negen onderzoeken over intercultureeliteit en de docentenopleidingen van de Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten' (Diversity. Nine researches on interculturality and teacher training courses at Amsterdam School of the Arts), Arts Education research group, Amsterdam, 2010.

2. The Master of Education in Arts is a part-time interdisciplinary course for artists and teachers operating in arts education.

'Expectations are traps,' said Ernestine Comvalius, director of the Amsterdam Bijlmer Theatre, at the Divers symposium organised by the Arts Education research group.<sup>1</sup> I believe this cuts to the heart of the cultural diversity issue in teacher training at the Amsterdam School of the Arts (AHK). Solely introducing changes to the content of the curriculum is not enough. Interpersonal relationships are equally important, so we must open up to unfamiliar encounters, confrontations and clashes. In short, anything that can grate, stimulate or even hurt. It will require self-reflection and open communication. And it will require that students and teachers alike accept a certain level of vulnerability.

**Defining art**

An event that took place during a course of the of Education in Arts provides a practical example.<sup>2</sup> Our students – all experts in their field – develop their knowledge with the help of a broad-based company of visiting lecturers and fellow students. As part of the interdisciplinary expertise module, guest lecturer and art historian Steven ten Thije took the students to the Play Van Abbe exhibition, which he had co-organised at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Shortly afterwards I read on student blogs that the group was dissatisfied and resentful about the visit. What had happened?

A student had asked the non-Western guest curator about a collection of everyday objects on display: 'Why is this art?' The curator experienced the question as dismissive and answered, according to Ten Thije, that it matters less whether something is art or not, and more that it is of interest – on a political or historical level, rather than a personal one. The answer to a question that has sprung out of genuine interest thus led to frustration and incomprehension among the students.

Writing on his museum visit, Ten Theije explained that it was here that he, 'realised for the first time what it means to be an art professional working in a globalised world, in a time when the domination of the West is dwindling.' Ten Thije believes he has detected a flaw in the fundamental structure of his lessons: they are based on a classical, modern understanding of art as, 'a component of a universalist, colonial period of Western domination.' The incident

described above was not so much about the clash between student and guest curator, but the fact that, 'within the theoretical framework I had put forward, this question, posed in this way, was still possible. Perhaps it will come across as abstract – and the distinction is indeed subtle – but what I realised as I reflected on the criticism, was that the student was not aware that she was not a student calling a teacher to account, but a Westerner calling a non-Westerner to account.

**Progress through communication**

This is the point where the full complexity of the situation is revealed: a visiting lecturer teaches Masters students and becomes increasingly aware of his special position as curator; the response of students then brings him to the realisation that he (but not he alone) has misled them, because his art history lessons contribute to an expectation students carry with them into the museum. Put simply, you see something, a painting, an image, and you expect it to have some effect on you. The exhibition did not satisfy those expectations and the students were put out.

The students and teacher then felt the desire to analyse with each other this mutually unsatisfactory state of affairs. This created an opportunity to connect Ten Thije's reflections on the matter with those of the students. In their discussion, there emerged among the students a sense of how their expectations had coloured their conversation with the curator and their interpretation of the exhibition. They also came to understand how their thoughts had been framed and how they had been shaped by previous art teacher training as well as by the visiting lecturer in question. This increase in understanding was a great relief to all concerned, because both parties had felt grievously misunderstood.

This was also an important step in heightening awareness, a process that is such a necessary step for artists and arts teachers operating in a variegated urban context who want to take the role of link between globalised artists and their audiences, or are seeking to effectively deploy their expertise in arts education for a globalised target audience – such as in schools with pupils of predominantly immigrant descent, a multicultural young people's theatre group or



particular boy dancing who was very reluctant at first – it got a very enthusiastic response from everyone else. You might actually be exploring collectivity and individuality or masculinity and femininity, but our students have no idea that's part of what the dance lesson's about. After the lesson, Patrick talked with them about 'the gaze', the way you look at someone else – about how you have to be aware of what it means if you're white-skinned and blond, for example, and you're in front of a class. The kids perceive you in a certain way.

important aspect of the whole process, because everybody was enjoying doing something that was foreign to them and they were also doing it with people who were 'foreign' to them.

**Did you meet any resistance from teaching staff?**

The most important issue – for students and teachers alike – turned out to be the relationship between tradition and innovation. Processes like this can give you the feeling that

world, then you're going to have to be able to put yourself into perspective and open up your cultural and artistic identity for discussion. The challenges we face going into the future are collectivity and flexibility. And that applies to education as much as anything else. That's where we are right now.

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