

THE DANCE FORUM

REACHING OUT - A BRIEF September 20 1986

File
Black Art

The Dance Forum was set up to facilitate the exchange of ideas and differences occurring within the non-western dance forms that are in existence in Britain today. To integrate dance into a wider society, coupled with the need to get together and discuss our varying views on subjects that control our development is essential if not vital.

There are many important reasons why this conference was initiated. The primary reason was the need to establish our presence in the field of dance, and also as a way of introducing the Forum to groups and individuals with whom we had little or no previous contact. Also it is a way of dispelling any doubts as to why we were set up six months prior to the GLC's abolition. Parminder Vir, an ex-GLC Arts Officer put into clear perspective the reason why it is important for organisations like the Forum to exist:

"We recognise that survival after the GLC's abolition was going to be difficult and while we provided and facilitated many groups it was also important to leave behind structures that consolidated that work, and encourage the different art forms to come together to form strong lobbying and pressuring groups".

The Dance Forum emerged from a number of long meetings with black artists, and the GLC provided resource facilities where needs and concerns were voiced. Administration and marketing are just two examples of difficulties for many groups who would like to operate successfully but do not have the financial resources in order to do so. The whole question of training and the special needs of non-western dance - the question of the performing arena where dancers are not satisfied dancing in ill-lit or ill-equipped venues that are unsuitable for dance - can we look hopefully at the main stream venues like the Coliseum, or Sadlers Wells opening their doors to Britain's non-western dancers?

The Forum was set up with very simple and practical objectives, namely:-

- articulating the needs and concerns of black dance and dancers
- to represent as a collective voice and influence policy, not just on black dance but dance as a whole
- to make demands and bring about a change in policies of programmers as well as funders
- to ensure access to adequate facilities
- to develop a systematic programme for the promotion of black dance i.e Black Dance Circuit
- centre and focus providing advice and resource material on dance, liaison with funding bodies and other dance organisations, policy making and enhancing the profile of black dance

As it was our first conference we had topics of discussion that would have been of interest to dance administrators, community workers, dance officers and people who are interested in policies concerning dance.

Lynn Maree (Greater London Arts) spoke on funding post GLC abolition. Pushkala Gopal chose to speak on the development of dance using Indian Dance as a parallel to other non-western dance forms in Britain at present. Hugh Masekela spoke on the history of music and it's inseparable partnership with dance. Hermin McIntosh spoke on Regional Arts Associations and their artistic and funding strategies.

Important points that the conference highlighted were :-

The fact that in presenting our dance forms to a British society we were - are - not taken seriously

Compromising our art forms to fit into funding categories in order to satisfy funding bodies' criteria, and even compromising dance forms to make them more accessible to a wider British society

The funding situation was bleak at the time of the conference and has not improved since then

Clearly the funding situation, or the lack of it took precedence over and above any other points of discussion, making it the most important issue at our afternoon conference. Consequently, The Dance Forum has drafted a statement to funding bodies and other interested parties stating clearly our grievances and dissatisfaction. We are asking for a more positive dialogue with the very people who determine and direct our development and growth through their policies. We sincerely hope that the situation for the Arts will improve in the near future - otherwise we are doomed as human beings, as our dance reflects our thoughts, feelings and experiences which we would like to share with our fellow human beings.

On behalf of THE DANCE FORUM,

Kieron Kawall
Administrator

Statement To Funding Bodies follows.....

THE DANCE FORUM

STATEMENT TO FUNDING BODIES

We, The Dance Forum, representing a number of groups and companies (see attached list), are seriously disturbed by the policy and practice of arts funding bodies (despite the much publicised Ethnic Arts Initiatives) towards 'Black Dance'. We regard these as based on ignorance, implemented with half-heartedness, and tending to distort rather than develop our various dance worlds.

CATEGORIES AND STRUCTURES

We strongly query the unthinking use of categories, of the term 'Black Dance' in particular. This assumes a commonality between the traditionally-based companies that fit most easily into this category. In actual fact, these companies are highly individualistic, springing from a geographical area far greater than Europe, and with diverse bases, characters, organisations and needs. The blanket term 'Black Dance' obscures all these differences and ensures that they are not reflected in appropriate funding policies.

We also believe that the way in which the terms 'Black and Ethnic Dance' are interpreted leads to the stifling of creativity in non-traditional dance groups. Whatever origins we spring from, those of us working in these fields firmly feel ourselves to be a part of a wider scene. We want to - have to - respond to a range of artistic influences and clear audience demand, without having to be afraid that change would invalidate the category of our funding, that is, we would lose our 'ethnic meal ticket'.

PROCESSES AND FUNDING

The adoption of categories and the inadequacies of Arts Council and Regional Arts Association policies in general spring largely, we believe, from lack of consultation, and lack of representation.

We are conscious of policies developed not with us but for us.

'Black Dance' is not fairly or indeed effectively represented within funding institutions. It is our understanding that no black person has a decision making role within the Arts Council or GLA dance departments. Advisors have a strictly limited role, with no policy making power. This indicates that the 'ethnic' representatives on these advisory boards are simply a gesture of tokenism, and as such serve only to reassure the funding bodies that they have made their 'contribution' to 'ethnic arts'.

Little consultation occurs. Even initiatives like GLA's recent invitation for tenders for a 'Black Arts Consultancy' is an inadequate approach. Again we must emphasise that there is the need for constructive discussion on such important issues.

In order to survive, groups have to tour nationally. However almost all of the 'black' companies are funded regionally to work regionally. This is an anomaly in funding terms, and a distinct pressure on the groups concerned.

We are conscious of the pressure from funding bodies for us to perform predominantly in community centres (thereby confirming to a limiting stereotype of 'black dance'). Our groups have come out of these communities - they should not have to remain there.

The emphasis on project funding keeps 'black dance' at a low level of development with no possibility of consistency or forward planning. We need a well-worked out development programme with assured funding, on a revenue basis for at least three years.

The criticism of 'black dance' by funding bodies; that work is stagnant and repertoires unchanging, utterly fails to appreciate the conditions in which we work, which we might add are a direct consequence of a lack of adequate funding.

Funding of 'black dance' is derisory, (for example, £50,000 for a Black Dance season as compared with £150,000 for a Black Theatre season), even less than that of the already existing low level of funding for dance in general.

Grants have also been directed with a lack of understanding for the circumstances in which groups find themselves. In particular, we believe that a section of a grant (an increased grant) should, on appropriate occasions, be specifically earmarked for administration and salaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe a meeting, or forum, with the full participation of funding bodies is both urgently needed and long overdue. The agenda should concentrate on the foregoing points, and also seriously consider the following ones:

The 'Black Dance' world needs the opportunity to get together and reassess its own situation and aims at greater length. We would like to see the institution of a series of 'sharing weekends' for those involved in the field.

European dance companies frequently invite foreign choreographers and guest artists. Non-european companies could benefit from that practice. A scheme and funding for this venture should be developed, as resources are limited.

A centre with workshops and rehearsal space is badly needed. The Roundhouse - though not for exclusive use as a dance centre - will be a valuable extra facility. The Arts Council should use its influence to ensure the speedy opening of what should have by now been a functioning centre.

Local authority partnerships have become increasingly important after the abolition of the GLC, yet they are frequently ill-equipped to deal with 'black dance'. We believe a series of seminars should be convened to increase the capabilities of local authorities.

Finally, like all the arts, dance ('Ethnic' as well as European) responds to careful management - to well aimed funding, and sensitive policies. The stereotype of 'black dance' appears to be a romantic, exotic growth, full of vibrant and fresh creativity - a noble savage, of the dance scene. We challenge this assumption which reeks of condescension, and call for policies that respond to reality and dignity.