Roots to Routes: The Evolution of Jamaica's National Dance Theatre Company and the School of Dance, Edna Manley College

Nicholeen DeGrasse-Johnson
The Visual and Performing Arts, Edna Manley College
nicholeen.degrasse-johnson@emc.edu.jm

Christopher A. Walker
University of Wisconsin, Madison
cawalker2@education.wsc.edu

Abstract

Presented as a retrospective dialogue between the two co-authors, this essay highlights the history of the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC), and the Visual and Performing Arts School of Dance, Edna Manley College (EMCVPA). The essay traces the post-independence evolution of modern dance in Jamaica. Furthermore, it examines the intersections, the respective roles, functions and contributions of the two major institutions which have shaped Jamaica's distinctive, modern dance teaching and public performances. By concentrating on their lived experiences, the co-authors explore themes of identity, educational modern dance's history and philosophies, and Jamaican dance's cultural and aesthetic dimensions. Finally, the essay invites a reimagining of the Caribbean contemporary dance which values folk, traditional and popular dance as sources for art and scholarship.

Key Words: Caribbean Dance, NDTC, Traditional dance, Folk dance, Popular dance, Contemporary dance, Reggae, Dancehall, Urban dance, Caribbean Culture, African dance

Introduction

Kumina (1971**)**, Keita Marie Chamberlain Clarke as wheeling as Queen, NDTC 2019, Stuart Reeves Photography

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Take 1: Introducing the co-authors: **Nicholeen DeGrasse-Johnson** is an arts educator, choreographer, and administrator who passionately believes in the transformative powers of dance and the arts in education. With over thirty years of experience in dance itself and dance education, she is committed to research which explores and develops the Caribbean aesthetic, by relating the visual and performing arts to art, performance and education through history, heritage and social change. As the Principal of Edna Manley of the Visual and Performing Arts (EMCVPA), Nicholeen's goals are to pursue and maintain high standards of artistic creation through arts practice, education, and to stimulate artistic and cultural awareness in the Caribbean community of the distinctive characteristics of our culture.

At present, a Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, **Christopher Walker,** is a multi-hyphenate contemporary dance/performance artist. His work intersects choreography for the concert stage with theatre, dance scholarship and resistance aesthetics of the African Diaspora. Christopher began dancing with the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) in 1997 and is a respected choreographer with the company. In 2000, Walker graduated from the School of Dance, at EMCVPA. Chris' embodied lived experiences and perspectives are presented freely, and have enriched the dialogue as it unfolded.

Take 2: The process: the co-authors: At the start, we had difficulty deciding on an approach for this essay. We both had so much to say about the two dance institutions that have impacted us so profoundly. We found that in writing this article, we were quite gracious with each other in our interactions, perhaps, because of our important roles and relationships in the past as: lecturer and student, mentor and mentee, or perhaps, because we are currently colleagues who have been seriously impacted by dance in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. We decided finally, to adopt a dialogical approach because the conversational structure captures our perspectives really well. As importantly, in our discussions, our synergies sparked and provoked much food for thought.

A Suh di Ting Setup (The NDTC & the EMC's School of Dance: The Beginnings)

Nicholeen DeGrasse-Johnson: The NDTC was founded at the time of Jamaica's independence in August 1962. As a nation, we "pulled down the red, white and blue flag of imperial Britain and replaced it with the gold, green, and black flag of an independent Jamaica" (in Nettleford, 1985, p. 39). Gaining independence, brought forth feelings of national pride and a strong consciousness of selfhood in our people. Strong nationalistic spirits, fostered the emergence of the national cultural/artistic institutions such as, the NDTC of Jamaica, and later the EMCVPA's School of Dance (which was formerly, the Cultural Training Centre, [CTC], the Jamaica School of Dance). In order to fully understand its purpose in the emerging, post-colonial country, one needs to situate the establishment of the NDTC within events in Jamaica's national development after independence. In my opinion, the NDTC is a reflection and a postulation of our reflexive abilities, as a nation. I believe that in a country with a history of enslavement and other colonial practices, there is a need for people to have opportunities to tell their own stories. It is a vital part of a process of emotional and psychological release that must underpin any notion of creating a healthy society. In this regard, Jamaican artists and people need avenues through which our artistic voices and our cultural images can be heard, presented and celebrated by the larger public. In each era, there needs to be provisions for new voices and new cultural images to emerge because the processes of cultural development and cultural translations are

continuous. Such notions are quintessential to the processes of Jamaicans achieving mental freedom. It was the important root from which the NDTC grew and flourished. According to Rex Nettleford (1994, p. 212):

> The Company's purpose was to secure for the Jamaican people one way of articulating their cultural identity and to build faith in a historical reality that was virtually denied by the three centuries of British subjugation.

Out of the clamour for nationhood, the NDTC began its journey by building on the "creative intensity, generated by self-discovery and self-emancipation" (Sherlock & Bennett, 1998, p. 391), with the focus on a new post-colonial Jamaica. The objectives and achievements of the NDTC were and still, are as follows:

1. To provide a vehicle for well-trained dancers and other dance theatre artists, such as choreographers, composers, and musicians, who want to participate in the creation of works of excellence rooted in Jamaica and Caribbean cultural realities.

2. To help create an informed Jamaican audience critically responsive to works of excellence in the theatre arts.

3. To experiment with various dance forms and techniques.

4. To develop a style and form that faithfully reflects Caribbean movement patterns.

5. To encourage serious research into the indigenous dance and music forms of Jamaica as well as the Caribbean (Nettleford, 2002).

The NDTC emerged from a union of dancers drawn in part from, the Ivy Baxter Dance Group, whose existence spanned the years from 1950 to 1962.[1] The key individuals who spearheaded the NDTC's formation were: firstly, a former Rhodes scholar, Rex Nettleford. At that time, Nettleford was a lecturer in political education at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. Secondly, there was Eddy Thomas, who had recently returned from studying and dancing in New York. Thomas was the recipient of an arts travel grant awarded by the Jamaican Government (Nettleford, 1985, p. 40). "Roots and Rhythm", performed on Wednesday, August 1, 1962, was aptly the title of the Company's first concert season. It was a celebration of the movements towards the cultural and national identity that Rex Nettleford had articulated so eloquently, in his work, teaching dance and publishing.

Sponsored by the Jamaican government, the NDTC had its first overseas tour to Stratford, Ontario, Canada to perform in the Stratford Shakespearean Festival, in 1963. A review of the Company's Stratford performance reads: "The NDTC thrilled an opening night audience at the Stratford Festival … with a program as varied in pace and *international in flavor* as the West Indies themselves"… [my italics] (Unknown source). After reading this review reprinted in the Company's newsletter (August 1980), I wonder what coded messages underpin the review. I still ponder, for example, the use of the phrase "international in flavor." Is this a subtle reference to the Company's multiculturalism and cross-culturalism, or is the phrase due to the absence of a socially constructed and accepted label of the other? From 1963 to 1997, the NDTC travelled widely to several North American cities and states, including: New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Toronto, Ohio, Washington, Miami, Alberta, Ottawa, Fort Lauderdale, Atlanta,

Connecticut and South Florida. Outside of North America, overseas tours included the Caribbean, Mexico, London, USSR, Germany, Australia, China and Japan.

The NDTC laid firm foundations for Dance Theatre and Concert Dance which were rooted in Jamaican and Caribbean experiences. Such experiences were highly valued and significant to the country's cultural development. They triggered the creation of spaces, organizations and institutions where creative curiosities about how the possibilities of dance and the creative arts in Jamaica could be allowed and encouraged to burgeon. Successes may be attributed to the following: the nature and relevance of the evolving creative works, the strong advocacy for dance and the arts, the establishment of a number of partnerships, and the unstinting work of the NDC's members. For example, one of the NDTC's founding members, Joyce Campbell headed the dance division of the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) for over four decades. Campbell expanded the number of traditional dance forms that were codified and taught in schools and communities. The extensive research fostered by Joyce Campbell tapped into the cultural forms which still existed in rural Jamaican communities. (The JCDC began in 1963 as the Jamaica Festival Office, with primary responsibilities for the preservation of Jamaica's cultural forms).

Established in 1970 by members of the NDTC – Sheila Barnett, Bert Rose and Barbara Requa -- the Jamaica School of Dance was absorbed somewhat later, by the Jamaican government in 1976. At that time, it became a division of the Institute of Jamaica's, Cultural Training Center (CTC), along with the Schools of Music, Art, and Drama. Rex Nettleford and the members of NDTC provided the under currents that propelled CTC's vision. In fact, this was a visible representation of the early infrastructural articulation of Nettleford's well known metaphor, 'inward stretch/outward reach'—the shaping of an institution where focused investigation on traditions of Jamaican and Caribbean dance and culture could take place, alongside the practice of other formal studio techniques and concert dance practice. The institutions are the infrastructure out of which all of Jamaica's concert dance has grown, in terms specifically of two categories, dance as cultural expression and dance as fine art. The dance institutions made it possible for me, as a young girl in Kingston in the 1980s and later on, for Chris, as a young boy in Ocho Rios in 1990s, to be able to develop our identities, to find ourselves, to navigate our own unique pathways and indeed, our very lives through and in dance.

Wha A Fi Yuh, A Fi Yuh (What is yours, is yours)

The NDTC presents an annual season of Dance in Kingston, Jamaica, at the Little Theatre for four to six weeks during the summer, as well as an annual Easter Sunday Morning Concert. The NDTC held a mini season in Mandeville in December. Jamaicans are otherwise able to access the NDTC through National events and television broadcasts.

Nicholeen DeGrasse Johnson: I have always considered myself to be an insider with the NDTC. My relationship with the NDTC has mainly been through the School of Dance at the EMCVPA, but the Company has always held a pride of place for me. In 1984, I attended the Jamaica School of Dance, then the Cultural Training Centre (CTC), and afterwards, the EMCVPA as a student. Over many years I became a lecturer and the Director of Studies of the School, EMCVPA. My lecturers and later colleagues were all members of the NDTC and hence my perspective as an insider. However, I believe I was the only member of faculty who was not a dancer or choreographer with the Company. Notwithstanding, I have been an avid follower of

their work over many years, even before I knew how integral they would become as part and parcel of a Jamaican cultural identity. Michael Manley (a former P.M.), suggests some of the contributions of the NDTC:

> The Company has time and again afforded Jamaicans the stimulus of sharing the genuinely creative expressions of its artistic endeavors, with the attendant intellectual and spiritual enrichment and sheer pleasure and enjoyment which such experiences impart. Above all, it has through its choreography, created a mirror in which Jamaica can see the best in herself. (Nettleford, 1985, p. 284)

I was only nine years old when I first saw the National Dance Theater Company of Jamaica (NDTC) in performance. It was an Independence Day celebration in 1974, I believe, at the National Stadium, a thirty thousand seat capacity outdoor space in Kingston, Jamaica. At that time, I did not know who they were, but I felt as if they danced right across the thousands of people in that National Stadium just for me. Their costumes beamed with brilliance in the evening sunset, as I focused intensely on the small moving bodies in the distance, the "easy," cool, Jamaican breeze brushing my face. I remember thinking as I watched the performance that I wanted to see them up close. This, I have done countless times since then. I think that this article is another opportunity to get 'up-close' to the NDTC as Christopher Walker, a graduate of the School of Dance, member of the NDTC, colleague and friend, and I, attempt to unpack the histories, impacts, and intersections which link the NDTC and the School of Dance. Finally, we explore their potential and suggest possibilities for a bright future.

Christopher Walker: I first experienced the NDTC by watching a broadcast of Gerrehbenta, choreographed by Nettleford on the TV. The television program featured both Marjorie Whylie, Musical Director of the NDTC and Rex Nettleford talking about the work. I felt like I knew the work even though I was seeing it for the first time. The movement vocabulary was well practiced in my body as they were similar steps, that as primary school children, we used in our ring games at recess. I remember an overwhelming feeling, I wanted to cry and in the end I was just happy. I felt centered. I felt powerful. It is the sort of emotion I have learned to manage as an adult, replacing most physical exaltation with a gentle smile. It is what I now know as pride and "soso joy". For me, the NDTC was regal, beautiful, and unmistakably Jamaican. I wanted to be able to do what they were doing. I wanted to be a part of something that made others feel the way I felt, at that moment.

Mi Bend But Mi Nah Bow
(Dancing Resistance – Establishing an Afro-Jamaican Identity Through Dance—Foundational and Seminal Works)

Jamaica has a population that is over 90% African, a result of the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in Jamaica. Enslaved Africans in Jamaica labored on sugar plantations. The plantation cane-piece, however, was not our beginning. In this section, we look at some of Nettleford's seminal and foundational works for the NDTC, which were instrumental in centering an unapologetic respect and acceptance of an Afro-Jamaican identity in Jamaica's developing concert dance traditions, and by extension in the life of this Jamaican. Rex Nettleford asserted a Jamaican identity rooted in West African traditions with works like *"African Scenario"* (1962), which premiered in the year of Jamaica's Independence (Nettleford, 1985, p. 284). The work is a narrative ballet set in Ghana, West Africa, with featured movement and

rhythms from traditional and cultural practices of Ghana. This was Jamaican Dance Theatre from a West African lens. "*Pocomania"* (1963), a dance theatre work highlighting the music, movement and practices of the African Jamaican religious cult based on 'Revival' – a creolised expression of African Spiritism and Baptist teachings, premiered a year later (Nettleford, 1985, p. 289). Here Nettleford asserts a Jamaican identity rooted in resistance and creative imagination. This was Jamaican Dance Theatre from an Afro-Jamaican perspective. These are foundational works in which new movement vocabulary is introduced to the concert stage for the first time. The discoveries made in these works are a part of the NDTC Framework, a codified system of Jamaican and by extension Caribbean dance vocabulary, from which countless movement structures and relationships can be built, and from which Nettleford continued to abstract and explore throughout the years.

Other foundational works include *"Drumscore"* (1979), which featured the drums as the main characters, 'Tambu', a rural Jamaican ring play song and dance, and introduced occupational activities done to rhythm as well as vocal utterances and nonsense rhymes—devises used to save rhythms during prohibition on African drumming; *"Myal"* (1974), African Spiritism; *"Court of Jah"* (1975), Rastafari; and *"Street People"* (1973), urban vernacular dance movement (See Nettleford, 1985, pp. 288, 289, 290, 289). They represent a canon of Jamaican concert dance rooted in the movement vocabulary and aesthetics that include Jamaica's pre-enslavement history and the resistance aesthetics shaped by Jamaica's unique cultural history of revolts, insurrections and protest.

"The Crossing" (1978), draws on movement which can be found in this framework (Nettleford, 1985, p. 289). The work explores the Middle Passage and plantation slavery through the lens of resistance and survival. It highlights the crossing of cultures and ideas beginning with West African aesthetics and ending with a fusion of ideas representing a new expression. The resulting transformation is captured in movement vocabulary reflective of new world experiences. In a final tableau, the dancers represent Africans in the West, looking and reaching towards the East (symbolizing mother Africa).

"Kumina" (1971), and *"Gerrehbenta"* (1983), along with *"The Crossing"* are the most performed works by the NDTC (See Nettleford, 1985, pp. 289, 287, 290 respectively). They have been featured in nearly every season and every major international tour since their premieres. They are aesthetically Jamaican, reflecting new-world experiences in costuming, paraphernalia, function and instruments, while remaining unmistakably African in the movement vocabulary and physical expression. Both works bring to the stage complex traditions that celebrate life in the face of death. Nettleford often remind us that the enslaved body could not be taken from the person and as such, the dance became an important weapon of cultural self-defense for our ancestors. The power of the African body to recreate life is affirmed in the play, relationships, suggestive movement as well as the cool inching and earth caressing steps which are designed to engage with ancestral energies in both forms. They both reflect the *creative intellect* and the *creative imagination* employed by Africans in bondage in the west as modes of resistance and survival.

Gerrehbenta (1983), NDTC Season 2016, Stuart Reeves Photography

"Kumina", *"Gerrehbenta"*, *"Drumscore"* and *"Pocomania"* are works created using source movement and processes from traditional forms, which are practiced in discrete communities in rural Jamaica. Many of these practices are not known to many Jamaicans in practice and function. For the everyday Jamaican, many of these forms are experienced through a healthy dose of cultural programming in media or through distilled JCDC art programmes in schools and communities. I learned Dinki Mini (featured in *"Gerrehbenta"*) at wake ceremonies in rural Jamaica, as well as in school - as a game. Nettleford's choreography, however, features wake practices from across the island—from *Gerreh* in the west to *Dinki Mini* in the east. (Dinki Mini, according to Cheryl Ryman, "is performed on the second night of the traditional Nine-Night observances" (in Nettleford, 1985, p. 242).

The Benta - is an Afro-Jamaican percussive instrument associated with the *Dinki Mini*. It was through this same work I was introduced to *Ettu*, a wake tradition of Yoruba ancestry that is performed in Jamaica. In the work, it is represented through music and movement, as well as through relationships, play and shawling rituals associated with the traditional practice. (Ettu, according to Ryman, is evidenced by a group from Hanover exhibiting Yoruba ancestry… 'Shawling,' [mentioned below] is a ritual throwing of shawls or scarf around the neck of another dancer (in Nettleford, 1985, p. 243). When I first read about *Ettu*, at the School of Dance, I had immediate images of the NDTC from which to make associations.

My introduction to *"Kumina"* was a video clip of the NDTC in performance on Jamaican television, then later watching the NDTC perform the work at the Little Theater in Kingston, with Rex Nettleford and Pansy Hassan dancing the King and Queen (these lead roles are now danced by Marlon Simms and Keita Marie Chamberlain Clarke). On the first sound of the Kumina drums, I felt a vibrant energy in the Theatre. On the opening musical break, I was immediately transported into the world of Kumina with vocals, movement and spatial interactions and design relationships, which I later discovered were pulled from aesthetic elements found in a traditional Kumina space. I have since attended many Kumina rituals, ceremonies and sessions and in those spaces I see the source vocabulary and aesthetics that inform the work. Nettleford's *"Kumina"* is not a traditional dance. It is a work of art based on the traditional music, movement and ritual of Kumina. It is designed so that no one engaged with the work will be mounted by the spirits. Spirit possession is expected in a traditional Kumina. Nettleford used choreographic devices to interrupt certain patterns in the expression of Kumina to prevent possession/mounting. One device is the use of port de bras phrase work on top of sustained footwork – these keep the dancer present. Another, is the interruption of the Kumina with the stick fight. The work highlights a graceful and elegant African-Jamaican ritual in music and dance. Kumina in the traditional space is performed for major life events. It is also performed for an activity known as tuning, designed to put the community back in balance. In the theatre, the audience is blessed with the vibrations of the rhythm and melodies, while the choreography projects an image of men and women working together to accomplish community goals under the leadership of an African King and Queen. I experienced Nettleford's Kumina at the Little Theatre, as a tuning (mentioned earlier, as a way of putting the community in balance).

Though Kumina and Gerrehbenta can be viewed on YouTube today. I find the ritual of the Theatre experience is an important aspect of how the NDTC's works are to be fully experienced. In the Theatre, the vibrations and energies are almost palpable and the audience vocally responds to the dances. These two dances are very good examples of sensory, interactive and participatory experiences.

Kumina (1971), Marlon Simms and Keita Marie Chamberlain Clarke as King and Queen, NDTC 2016, Stuart Reeves Photography

Groundinz (Reflecting the Caribbean in my dance training)

In the mid-1990s, I saw the School of Dance for the first time. It was in a rehearsal with Movements Dance Theatre, who had rented a studio at the School. By this time, there were many companies and organizations in Kingston representing, diverse approaches to dance technique, choreography and performance. Monica Campbell of *Movements Dance Theatre Company* saw me perform on the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission's (JCDC) stage and invited me to study and perform with her company. For over two years, I travelled back and forth across the island from my home in Ocho Rios to Kingston to study dance with her company. Afterwards, I attended the School of Dance, between 1997 and 2000. My training was impacted positively by many of the discoveries in dance in Jamaica, because the ideas intersected in meaningful ways with the School of Dance's curriculum, facilitated through the work of faculty, guest artists and through performance and apprenticeship opportunities.

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I remember that teachers pondered questions about technique and post-colonial expression, as well as the types of physical narratives that represented unique Caribbean experiences. It was a master class by L'Antoinette Stines, Founder and Artistic Director of *L'Acadco* that triggered my early questions about the diverse roles technique could play in contemporary movement. Joseph Robinson, Co-founder and Artistic Director of *Ashe*, challenged and deepened my understanding of internal and external aspects of movement. Barbara McDaniel, Founder and Artistic Director of *Dance Theatre Xaymaca*, encouraged me to create work for her company. This is the importance of the School of Dance—it is a space into which much of the diverse forms of dance research and study occurring in Jamaica are funneled.

Education and training at the School of Dance intersected with the NDTC in many ways. The relatively recent history of its founding allowed me immediate access to the key NDTC members, their work, innovations and discoveries. During the 1990s, many of the costumes for traditional and folk dances, as well as specific folk dances that were used at the School were donated from early works of the NDTC. I remember how my own process of learning and moving was informed by the sheer weight of the traditional costumes, and how they informed an important and grounded way of my moving, and further, I remember how a particular type of fabric interacted with the space. These are practical investigations which would have been otherwise difficult to learn or discover without that type of embodied access to the NDTC. Alaine Grant, a bridge generation member of the NDTC, was the Director of Studies at the School of Dance when I began my studies. She taught Dance Injury and Prevention and NDTC Repertory courses, with a distinct Jamaican sensibility, quite often using traditional dance movement vocabulary to exemplify the placement of the body in motion or to speak to specific movement qualities. The modern dance concepts that Grant used as examples were taken from the modern dance vocabulary that Nettleford had developed in the NDTC and sourced from works such as *"Dis Poem"* (1988), *"Flash of the Spirit"* (1988), *"Praise Songs"* (1989), and *"Spirits at a Gathering"* (1995), to name a few (Nettleford, 2009, pp. 285 & 287). The vocabulary Nettleford developed for these works represented a Caribbean modern and contemporary dance language developed from years of investigation into the traditional and folk forms of the region. Evidence of the contemporary evolution of this distinct Jamaican dance language can also be seen in works such as *"Blood Canticles" (1996), "Tintinabulum"* (1997), *and "Odyssey"* (2005), among others (Nettleford, 2009, pp. 287 & 290).

Blood Canticles (1996), Collage showing the Revival and Totem sections, NDTC 2019, Stuart Reeves Photography

Traditional and Folk Dance practice, as well as the popular urban manifestations were an important part of the School of Dance curriculum; all students were being prepared to teach the traditional forms with clarity. When one dances in the traditional space, or perform a step in the traditional way, the movement or step is based on physical literacy of the movement vocabulary and knowledge of the intention and function. In the traditional context, the dancer has the responsibility to shape, express and bring the moment of play to life. In the NDTC, the "folk" or versions of traditional vocabulary one learns are defined, and shapes the movement vocabulary that were sourced from the traditional movement and manipulated for studio use (ways of learning) and concert dance (ways of performing). Though similar in many ways to the traditional steps, these movements have required design, shape and technical pathways that are a part of the aesthetic of the work. I first understood this concept through Grant, who taught NDTC repertory at the School of Dance with a sense of clarity and movement specificity. Much of the vocabulary in the modern works of the NDTC is sourced from traditional vocabulary. This clarity elevated the vocabulary in my experience and gave me a window into the discoveries and investigations into the choreography and potential for future vocabulary development.

At the School of Dance, my traditional and folk dance teachers were Alice Berry, Nicholeen DeGrasse-Johnson and Joseph Robinson with guest residencies by Nettleford and Stines among others. Though they all created in the folk genres, all of them can be identified as contemporary artists and scholars. The NDTC had unapologetically led the charge in creating a unique cultural product from the folk and traditional expressions of the Jamaican people. At the School of Dance, Barbara Requa (co-founder), was keen on referencing the works of Barnett (co-founder), Nettleford, McBurnie and other regional dance scholars and practitioners. She taught

the dance composition courses and facilitated the spaces for creative research in dance movement and choreography.

NDTC Inna Foreign (North American Connections)

In the early years there were NDTC-American connections with Graham, Ailey and others. It began in 1960 when co-founder Eddy Thomas studied at the Graham school from 1960 to 1962. The Graham school was one of the few American modern dance schools that would legally admit dancers from the Caribbean. Consequently, Graham was the only non-Jamaican to have been a founding Patron of the NDTC (Jones, 1983, CARIBE, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 22). Thomas had danced with the Graham Company during his sojourn and opened the door for others like Clive Thompson (who danced with both Graham and Ailey) to attend. Other members of the NDTC – Bert Rose, Barry Moncrieffe and Audley Butler – won scholarships to the Graham school. An open invitation was given to the dancers of the Company to take classes when in New York. NDTC dancers Derek Williams and Patsy Ricketts were among founding members of Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem. By the end of the 1960s, other members of the Company worked with modern dancers like Eleo Pomare, Rod Rodgers, Anna Sokolow and in off-Broadway shows. The NDTC worked with Dunham dancer, Lavinia Williams while she was in Haiti, and with John Jones and Alvin Ailey who allowed the duet from "Revelation" to be brought into the NDTC repertoire (Jones, 1983, CARIBE, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 22).

These artistic developments have emanated through distinct post-colonial practices projected on the stage and in the dance studio – the absorption of several aesthetic principles. Through determination and a quest for national and international cultural identity, the NDTC returned to the various performance spaces year after year with their dances that exemplified their mixed traditions. These concepts were not only a reflection of cultural and historical beginnings but also artistic processes enriched by those with whom the Company came in contact.

Modern dance technique taught at the School of Dance, reflects its history. Chris studied modern dance technique with faculty from Jamaica, Cuba, Suriname, Haiti, and Barbados. While Nicholeen, on the other hand, experienced modern dance faculty from Jamaica, Cuba, and Haiti. A commonality Chris and Nicholeen shared was that irrespective of where the teachers were from, techniques with Graham, Horton, Cunningham foundations, were taught with a sensibility to Caribbean movement diversity. The NDTC taught an appreciation of preparing dancers for modern and contemporary work, but also to do the traditional dances and cultural expressions of the various Caribbean countries represented in the School's technique curricula. For example, students studied Cuban modern technique as well as the Cuban folk and Orisha dances that informed the technique. When Jean Guy Saintus of Haiti taught Modern Technique, he also taught the traditional Afro-Haitian forms that informed the movement language. In line with the Cultural Training Center's philosophy, students studied the traditional forms with the specific pedagogy to later share their knowledge when they became teachers and cultural agents. Both Chris and Nicholeen in turn developed an appreciation for the diverse technical approaches to unearthing, teaching and creating dance within a Caribbean space which was championed, expanded and shared with the public due to the work of Nettleford and the NDTC.

Reasonin Wid Nettleford (Interacting with Rex Nettleford)

Nicholeen's exposure to Nettleford's genius came in classes like Caribbean Studies and the weekly dance Master classes held at the School of Dance.

Nicholeen continues: In the 1980s, Nettleford's Caribbean Studies consisted of students from all four (Drama, Dance, Music, Visual Arts) Schools at the Cultural Training Centre (CTC). I remember students salivated at the exploding content referencing cultural identity theories. We probed themes such as nationalism and Caribbean pride as we studied about great Caribbean minds like Eric Williams, Derek Walcott, Marcus Garvey and Kapo. We were exposed to NDTC movement vocabulary and musical sounds that spoke of rippling backs and thrusting hips. Chris experienced Nettleford Caribbean Studies in a similar capacity in the 1990s, but he also experienced a deep mentoring relationship within the NDTC.

Chris continues: Rex Nettleford was a father figure. I met him outside the NDTC studios on the first day of school. He called me "country boy" in a tone that was as honorable as if he was saying "Prime Minister." I applied for and received an NDTC Scholarship and began apprenticing with the Company in my first semester. I had seen the company in a TV program. I was now officially learning the dances. Many of the basic steps were already in my body from practicing the dance movements which I saw on VHS tapes, a friend gave me. My first performance with the NDTC was in Mandeville in December of 1997. While we were rehearsing, Nettleford gave me a VHS tape of the NDTC. It was a copy of the same program that I had seen years before. This was my first of many 'how could he have known' moments. Rex Nettleford followed up by giving me advice, books, articles, dance videos and generous letters of recommendation. My generation of NDTC dancers felt that he was in tune with the members of the Company and could identify what we needed in order to better serve us. And—make no mistake—Nettleford served.

As dance captain and rehearsal director, I had the opportunity to remount and rehearse many of Nettleford's works including seminal works like Kumina, The Crossing and Gerrehbenta. In fact, it was my demonstrated interests in studying his early movement investigations and research that triggered this process of mentorship. I got to remount foundational works like *"Pocomania"* and *"The King Must Die"* (1968) for the NDTC (See Nettleford, 2009, p. 281). Nettleford gave me access to early notes and sat for interviews to discuss his process and early ideas in developing the work. I had access to founding Company members and original cast members who participated in the process. In Pocomania, Nettleford often uses unison moments where everyone is doing the same vocabulary their own way - a community of individuals performs very differently from an ensemble in synchrony. The former was an aesthetic necessity that the Rt. Hon Edward Seaga, whose research had informed the work, highlighted as an important element. Since Pocomania is performed to a live score and rooted in traditional practice, The Company's Musical Director, Marjorie Whylie, a musicologist and celebrated Jazz pianist in Jamaica was instrumental to the process. Her research intersects with the relationship between music and dance and how they inextricably linked in traditional spaces. Whylie demonstrated the vocal patterns, the drum patterns and when necessary the movement vocabulary or how specific body parts were impacted by sound or tone.

We remounted *"The King Must Die"* for the Haitian Bicentennial. The foundational status of the work became clear as much of the Afro-Haitian vocabulary in the later works by

Nettleford were abstractions and developments of much of the movement phrases in this choreography. Here Nettleford uses both "hot" and "cool" movement sourced from Voodoo to build a movement dramaturgy for the work. Those early abstractions have continued to inform the modern and contemporary dance language Nettleford developed in the NDTC over the years. Similarly, the revival section in *"Blood Canticles"* features choreographic elements and a yard to stage the crafting used in the foundational work *"Pocomania"*.

The Jamaican dancer is trained in diverse relationships to the drum; learning to dance its percussive rhythms, its harmonic resonances and disturbing silences. This is a legacy of the NDTC System of Training. The musical score for the NDTC class is based on Caribbean drum patterns. Different tones and patterns are associated with different body parts in many African Caribbean forms. This knowledge is leveraged to create and or repurpose rhythms for use in technique class harmonizing natural physical responses to rhythm and tone. This knowledge informs what patterns are played for a designed training outcome. In the NDTC, a specific rhythm accompanies each exercise. The School of Dance is the largest beneficiary of these concepts and processes through Nettleford and teachers like Barry Moncrieffe, a founding member of the NDTC, former artistic director of the NDTC and lecturer at the School of Dance for many years. Barry Moncrieffe's modern dance technique included Graham-based floor work set to a Caribbean score – the drums adding the accents for the exercises. Uncle Barry routinely used phrases from NDTC repertory in which Nettleford abstracted Caribbean traditional and folk vocabulary for the concert dance stage, as a way to exemplify a particular technical element. Many of these early discoveries in NDTC foundational works are taught as phrase material and class exercises. The musicians of the NDTC who accompany dance classes at the School for many years also contribute this system.

Forward Movement (Next Steps)

The NDTC and the School of Dance have been doing a dance of avocation and vocation for over some 43 years. Both organizations represent the premiere institutions of its kind in the English speaking Caribbean. One organization is preparing professionals for the field, while the other function as a voluntary service space. As a student at the School of Dance and later as a professional in the field, I experienced this conflict primarily, where it impacted on my ability to live and work in Jamaica as a dance artist/scholar. The NDTC is a voluntary space with professional attitude. That meant a commitment to professional output, to excellence and service. As an institution, the NDTC has served as an important space for pre-professionals, professionals who studied at the School of Dance and artists whose intentions were to return to their home countries or travel to Europe and North America for professional careers. Under Rex Nettleford, the NDTC fulfilled this role as offering the initiation for many Jamaican dancers preparing for a professional career in North America or Europe. The core membership is made up of professionals (lawyers, academics, educators, administrators, students, etc.). NDTC members who are dance professionals make their living from associated work in academia or through creative projects. NDTC rehearsals therefore begin at the end of the workday. Other company members include apprentice and provisional members some of whom become full members. The NDTC also serves students from all over the Caribbean who come to EMCVPA to have professional high quality concert dance experience before moving on to professional careers.

The NDTC facilitates professional training and preparation through its scholarship program with the School of Dance. I was one such recipient. While on scholarship, scholars train and perform as apprentices with the NDTC. Many toured internationally with the company. NDTC scholars have gone on to professional careers in dance, many completing graduate degrees in dance and related fields. In the 1990s, the NDTC had several concurrent scholarship students at the College. Six of us overlapped at the School of Dance: two went on to professional careers in dance performance, three completed graduate degrees and are employed as dance faculty, and one focused on dance education and currently, works with younger populations.

The company is committed to reflecting the potential of the Caribbean voice through its works. It is therefore vital that in its current process of "renewal and continuity", the NDTC continue to investigate contemporary works that pull from the experiences of Caribbean people by continuing to partner and collaborate with choreographers from across the region and the diaspora, while developing local voices through incubation programs like the Young Choreographers Workshop and Showcase. The showcase is produced by the NDTC at its studios annually. It is imagined as a space for young choreographers to present work, get feedback and hopefully get their work selected for performance. It was meant as an incubatory space for the development of new contemporary works rooted in Jamaican and Caribbean consciousness. It encourages collaboration among musicians, dancers and designers; the showcase leans on the technical theatre students to form the production team. The space becomes effective with engagement from established choreographers and dance enthusiast. Young choreographers work with dancers from the School of Dance as well as from different dance studios. Here, students get to engage in critical dialogue about the development of contemporary dance.

Till Nex Time, Tink 'Bout Dese Tings (Conclusion)

The Jamaican, Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport (MCGES) is producing a new cultural policy document that reflects the contemporary needs of the diverse and largely popular Jamaican public for cultural products. I am looking forward to new infrastructures. Our theatres need updating. The north coast has been left without appropriate performance spaces for too long. One can imagine a mutli-use performance space on Jamaica's north coast that can present works of excellence. A destination venue for Jamaican performing arts. Such a space can be funded and supported by public and private partnerships and would certainly be supported by international, regional and local audiences who move through Jamaica's north coast on a weekly basis. Dance as a Jamaican cultural product is a hot commodity in the rest of the world, so much so that there are many artists whose work is completely and solely based on the Jamaican dance cultural product.

Can Kingston, Ocho Rios or Montego Bay, Jamaica, financially support a professional dance company? No individual city should be expected to do so. Every major dance company around the world is supported financially by touring and through donations and grant funding. A commitment to building the local and regional infrastructures and producing partners in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora, would create a circuit that would offset single production and single tour costs. The NDTC has high visibility throughout the Caribbean and throughout the Caribbean Diaspora. As mentioned earlier, on tour, the NDTC has performed in major North American cities such as Miami, New York, Toronto and London.

Having toured extensively since 1963, The NDTC is appropriately poised to help in creating an infrastructure for professional dance companies to exist in Jamaica and to tour the region, the diaspora, and the world. The EMCVPA School of Dance should be leading the conversation about the two key functions of vocation and avocation in the dance field. What of graduates who want to dance and choreograph professionally, to live in Jamaica, and still make their contributions to the world of dance from 'right a yaard'?

Kumina (1971), Marlon Simms as King Blowing Libation, NDTC 2019, Stuart Reeves Photography

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Endnote:

[1] Ivy Baxter (1923-1993), Jamaican dancer, choreographer and Director of the Ivy Baxter Dance Group, founded in 1950. Ivy Baxter was the first choreographer to introduce 'barefoot dancing' to the country. Such dancing was a significant departure from the traditional colonial, European, folk dance genre which was taught for example in schools.

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