JILL CUTLER and IVOR MILLER

Eno Washington: the memoirs of a Mississippi shaman*

Introduction

The Memoirs of a Mississippi Shaman *chronicles the making of an American dancer who has harnessed the vast cultural resources of his community of birth to develop his art on an international scale. The kinetic, spiritual and moral lessons Washington learned as a child in Portland, Oregon and Chicago laid a foundation for the specific and unique contributions he has made to dance research and to our understanding of the African diaspora. This is the chronicle of a dancer deeply engaged with the social issues of his day; namely, the quest of African-Americans to reconstruct their African past and the quest for civil rights in our society.*

I was a very lucky person to have met Washington in 1982, soon after his return from the Senegambian region of West Africa. I began to take his classes at Smith College in Black vernacular jazz and West African traditional forms of movement. I knew little of Black dance or culture until I stepped into that dance studio, and the experience changed my life. Soon after this, he created one of the few integrated companies in the country to perform Black dance, of which I was a part from 1983-85.

This project arose from a desire to continue Eno's legacy as teacher/

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* Extracts from *Memoirs of a Mississippi Shaman: the autobiography of Eno Washington*, edited and with an introduction by Jill Cutler and Ivor Miller (New Haven, CT, Dance on the Wind Productions). It is companion to an award-winning video of Eno Washington's work.

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scholar/performer. He once told me that 'young people today don't learn from their elders or from books, they learn from TV and from their peer groups'. This is one reason we collaborated on a video about him called Dance on the Wind, *in which Eno dances his life story, meanwhile reflecting on the historical forces that shaped his life and the evolution of African-American dance.*

Much has been written by scholars about African 'retentions' and 'carry-overs', etc., in the Americas. Memoirs, *which is made up of material from taped interviews and Eno's writings on dance over some twenty years, attempts to clarify some of the relationships between dances of the Malian Empire and the Black vernacular forms, and the parallel modes of Black sacred and secular 'performance'. Eno's scholarship presents an extremely rare case of a working-class Black American artist who has studied in West Africa and made connections, not only based on observed behaviour, but embodied involvement. We will never know the full story of African migration into the Americas, but Eno's mode of inquiry provides us with unique and profound insights.*

Washington is part of a large community in the US who practise West African forms of dance and drumming. Yet, within this community he is unusual because of his years of training as a ballet and modern dancer. Like his colleagues in African dance, Washington conceives of dance as a political imperative, one that can educate and heal. Like his church-going family from Arkansas, Mississippi, Chicago and Portland, he knows movement as a vehicle for the expression of the divine. And his training in ballet gave him a sense of line and suppleness which he applied to everything he did.

His dance techniques are truly integrated, being a combination of African, African-American, European and Euro-American forms. The integration of African, Black Christian and African-American secular movement into a Pan-African technique was a revolutionary act in US dance history. Washington and his colleagues' creation of Pan-African dance was a strategy of resistance to the dominant society, similar to the art of James Brown and Nina Simone.[1] While Washington helped to create this dance technique, he also realised that all along, in the churches and dance halls of the Black United States, African-Americans were dancing in ways related to African sensibilities and that these needed to be studied.

Among the forces influencing Eno's generation were African independence movements and the US Civil Rights struggle. Part of the process of liberation from European and Euro-American dominance in education was the development and recreation of a national and indigenous culture expressed through music, movement and symbols. Fodeba Keita's Les Ballets Africains *became the official national ensemble of Guinea Conakry in 1958, when the country won independence. Its powerful presentations became the impetus for national ensembles in Jamaica*

(1962), the national folklore group of Cuba (early 1960s) and for black nationalist dancers in the US.

The history of Black dance is a history of resistance. Slaves could express their own forms of movement only in secret meetings. From early in the North American colonies there were efforts, mainly by Puritans and Quakers, to discourage and prevent dancing of all kinds, especially African dance.

But, if 'to Cotton Mather, dancing was at best a trifle',[2] to many Africans and their descendants, dance maintains relationships between mortals, the gods and ancestors. In 1843, the Presbyterian (New School) General Assembly passed a resolution against dancing.[3] For many African-Americans, conversion to Christianity meant abandoning a disgraced African past, and the dancing associated with it. The generations of African-Americans who have actively sought and seek to align themselves culturally and spiritually with Africa and its diaspora represent a strong departure from this Puritan tradition. Eno and his generation took the ideas of Pan-Africanism and created an expressive culture by studying and teaching dance and music, from Lagos to Los Angeles, from Detroit to Dakar.

Eno's goal was to demonstrate that African-American vernacular dance and music is in and of itself a world class form and able to express all spectrums of human emotion. He felt that African-American dance must be taught and be aesthetically appreciated along with the accepted forms of ballet and modern dance, and strove to articulate a history of Black dance through performance. He wrote that his goals were:

> *to educate, and carry forth the classical traditions of African-American virtuoso dance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, extending from post Civil War minstrelsy through the TOBA,[4] Vaudeville, Broadway, Hollywood movies, and MTV, reaching its zenith in the late 1950s and constellated by such artists as Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, the Berry Brothers, Earl 'Snakehips' Tucker, and James Brown. From the two-step to Hip Hop the African-American element in the US has been the lifeblood of popular American dance and music.*

Like Malcolm X and other Black nationals, Washington's travels to Africa profoundly affected his life's course. He gained a new sense of himself as an American whose spiritual sensibilities connect him to West Africa. He saw in Africa that dance, music, spiritual force are part of one entity, a concept he first knew in the churches of his childhood. He saw the continuation of certain African sensibilities, as expressed through music and dance, to be a human imperative and a healing force, one that has the potential to reconnect all Americans to their bodies, to their own spirits and to the land they walk on.

Eno is a universalist; he truly believes that cultural forms are gifts for

humanity to cherish and share, not vehicles for exclusion and creating difference. And this belief is part of the power of his performance. As Jill Cutler has written:

> *When Eno dances you are looking at not a dancer but Dance, moving through a body with its impersonal force almost untainted by human agency. As a dancer Eno has thought deeply about the use of trance and ecstatic states, and this thinking is part of the way in which he is able to receive and channel forces outside himself. When he dances, he is truly one with the drum (or whatever music he uses). At the same time he can be totally aware of what is going on around him; he is very much there onstage, very much interacting with other dancers, effervescent, humorous, or serious – in short, a consummate performer.*[5]

Ultimately, Washington's scholarship and lived experience have clarified some aspects of Black US culture. The bond between sacred and secular in music is well known. The structure and sound of the music in either case may be similar, but it is the context in which they are performed that determines their effect. The dual careers of Thomas Dorsey, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Sam Cooke and many other musicians have shown the gospel/soul continuum. Washington's work suggests that Black dance also merges the sacred and secular in many contexts.

Eno argues that performative conversations between musicians and dancers have been continually used as vehicles for African-Americans to recreate holistic African experiences, that is trance states, in both sacred and secular contexts. African sensibilities that viscerally link music/dance/devotion to the creator are alive in the dance halls of Black USA. A prime example of trance in dance halls is James Brown, whose musical and dance inventions have, since the 1950s, been 'forever imitated yet never duplicated'. In his 'Gotta bag of my own', he shouts: 'Hit me, hit me, I'm getting happy', using a cross denominational religious term to signify that a worshipper is 'going into the spirit'.

Many scholars have argued that the Congo region has had the greatest impact on US Black dance. For example, the Stearns' classic Jazz Dance *suggests that many African-American dance forms, including the 'Ring-Shout', are of BaKongo influence, hence the name Congo Square in New Orleans where slaves held ceremonies until these were outlawed. Eno points out that some of the connections to BaKongo movement were inferred by analysing separate body movements – inflections of the hip, the torso and the head. Eno's view is that these movements cannot be examined in isolation and that the coordinated efforts of the whole body might reveal another set of influences.*

Eno's sense that there is a much larger West African influence than has been suggested by current scholarship is supported by the work of scholars like David Dalby, who wrote that 'up to 40 per cent of first

generation Black Americans were born in the extensive area of Mandingo cultural and linguistic influence'.[6] *Eno's kinesthetic understanding of movement led him to make connections between the Mandjiani time step (called Dounba) of the Bambara people and the Pony; between the Sabar dance of the Wolofs and the Dog; between the Lenjengo dance of the Mandingos and the Temptations Walk; between the Ghanaian initiation dance and the Funky Chicken, and between the Charleston and Wolou Sodon (dance of the Woloso people).*

Washington did not work alone in his efforts. The power of his insights stems from continual participation in African-American communities. There was his mother, who first taught him the many dances she knew, and who took him to church where he experienced the glory of God brought down to the church by the conviction and movement of its congregation. Then there was Ahmad Sahir, Eno's teacher, who taught the expression of rage and defiance through movement. Sahir was part of a growing community of African-American dancers who performed versions of West African and Caribbean dances. Self-styled and taught, they often learned dances from commercial and anthropological films on Africa. Learning drumming from records, costuming from picture books, from Caribbean and African immigrants, they created a network of communities throughout the urban US. Their determination and resourcefulness in creating a connection to Africa was and is staggering.*

Washington's apprenticeship with Sahir shows clearly how ideas of Black nationalism were created and conveyed through performance. In Sahir's 'Something We Lost', issues of Africa, slavery and the Middle Passage were presented to the community, even if they were not welcomed. Through Sahir's dance, embodied action made the past present. The body diving to the floor symbolised the shipboard suicides of slaves who preferred to die by their own hands; the prone body arched back to an extreme became the slave ship that rolled painfully across the sea; the erect body, straight and tall, became the stance of a new generation.

IVOR MILLER

Beginnings

I was born in St Louis and raised in Chicago and Portland, Oregon. Certainly moving from Chicago to Portland in 1963 was an influential event in my life. My parents moved there driving a '60 Pontiac Bonneville with the family television set packed safely in the trunk. Reflecting now, I realise that had we not then left Chicago for Portland, by now I

* The Hollywood film, *King Solomon's Mines*, with five minutes of 'authentic' Watusi dance at its end, was used as a resource to learn the dance in the US.

could have very likely died from an overdose of heroin, or been caught in the ever present web of Black middle-class aspirations, or followed my third grade friend, Jimmy Walker, into the maze of gun-toting, switchblade-wielding street gangs. I also know that I have not escaped these ends, perhaps only prolonged the agonising inability of a Black man to survive with dignity in the United States.

I came from a strong religious Southern Black Baptist family. It was in church that I first saw movement. As an infant, I recall being held by my mother every Sunday in church, absorbing the rites and rituals of a transmuted African experience. The voices of the minister and congregation still echo in my ears and, though I did not know it then, that was my initiation into the culture of Africa.

My family is traditionally Baptist, in which 'The Shout' is endemic, but I have clear remembrances of the Pentecostals. They were the holy rollers, those people danced all night like the Jolas of The Gambia, dancing tirelessly for hours and hours, shuffling, stomping, jumping, knocking over benches in a stultifying frenzy but never getting hurt, always protected while in praise of the Lord. I went to one of their revivals in Portland, the Church of God in Christ, and they be dancing for days! It's part of the ritual. There would be no crossing of feet,* but they'd be running like the Blues Brothers[7] when Elwood finally saw the light, they be running in place, knees be pumpin', the sweat be pourin', because God and the ancestors speak through the sweat of the dancers. So dancing was allowed in the church, depending upon an individual's sincerity of self-expression and personal relationship with Jesus at the time. But the hierarchy definitely would not dance, not in public places.

The legendary dancer and anthropologist, Dr Pearl Primus, has noted that the Southern Baptist church was the original bastion of surviving Africanisms.[8] The voice of the preacher became the voice of the drum, the congregation became the accompanying drum ensemble, elderly men and women would tap their feet in concerted rhythms amidst the antiphonal shouts of 'Amen' in response to the booming voice of their chosen leader. The church was the only release for the anger, pain and frustrations of the African slaves completely severed from their homeland and indigenous cultures. Movement for the glory of God in the church was not called dance, because 'dance' was considered secular and sinful. But movement did occur and nurses were frequently employed to help pacify the members of the church who could possibly hurt themselves in the cathartic release of 'praise dancing'.

The word 'dance' is used in the Bible, but in church they call it being

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* The practice of leaving feet uncrossed in ceremony is found in contemporary Yorubaland, Nigeria, and in Cuban espiritismo. The feet here are left uncrossed to leave a straight path for spirits to enter the ceremony.

'filled with the holy spirit'. When the spirit comes down, that's how I first knew dance, before I heard the word or knew *any* words! Being with the Holy Ghost takes one over, it's quite a thing, and it really happens. It's the same whether it's Candomblé (Brazil) or Lucumí (Cuba) – when they take over, then your eyes roll up and you have to step back!

My mother was a hoofer, a ballroom dancer. In between that and church, my mother inspired me as a dancer. I always say that it is through my mother's house that I dance, and it is through my father's house that I have the acumen to survive in the society in which we live.

African-Americans kept track of events through records, through wearing out the groove in a particular record. You would remember events, whether it was this birth, this lover, or this fight, through playing this record over and over again; that would mark the event. Something might happen that brings out an emotional feeling and reaction that signals a time frame. That's why, when people hear 'My girl', they start singing the lyrics, whether they're in the barbershop, in line at the grocery store, or in their cars! Just because maybe they had met somebody who they became even more deeply in love with through the sharing of that music and the sharing of those words. Some people will even start crying.

I remember that I was dancing in 1955, not because of any calendar, but because I remember Tennessee Ernie Ford's '16 Tons', and I remember the phrase 'like being hit by a falling tree, woman what'd you do to me?', and the song 'The things I used to do' by Guitar Slim. And I remember being in St Louis and seeing my mother and father dance, fight, hug and kiss to these songs. And these records don't got no grooves now. So we would play a record until the whole frequency of the song became a part of one's being.

I went to Benson Polytechnic High School from 1965-1967. In 1967, I was chosen to participate in Reed College's Upward Bound programme, which dramatically changed the complexion of my life. The demise of Upward Bound programmes throughout the country has been attributed to those which were accused of producing 'radicals'. Reed's programme was one with such a reputation. There I met Black men and women from different parts of the US who had noted intelligence but would not or could not blend into the general scope of high school education. At Reed, I took classes on Black History, a subject I had never heard of, and other classes involving art, politics, science and maths. The flexibility of the programme also enabled me to practise my dancing for three to four hours a day on campus. I learned to transfer new thoughts and ideas from the classroom to the dance room. I had previously given speeches pertaining to Civil Rights and the struggles of Black Americans at Benson, and I was totally open to the extension of these issues into the dance.

One of the projects we students did was to canvass the upper middle class area surrounding Reed's campus, asking people door-to-door their opinions on the Vietnam War and Civil Rights. The results jolted me into doing more questioning as to the true mores of the American people, wanting to span the gap between what I learned from school-books and what I saw in everyday life. I started to learn from activity and to place an educational value on experience.

I was baptised in the Green Grove Baptist Church in Chicago in 1959, but my secular 'baptism' didn't occur until I transferred from Benson Tech to Andrew Jackson High School. Participating in Upward Bound forced me to see how the 'other side' lived.

Jackson High School is a small high school located in Portland's southwest hills on a luxurious campus. The administration granted students an amazing amount of free time to study, prepare for classes or to discuss subject matters. I used my free time to organise the city's first Black student union among the school's thirty-two Blacks and to organise discussion groups on the topics of Civil Rights. I refused to study for assignments unless there was an equal amount of consideration and class work concerning the emerging Third World. When I did school work, the topics I chose were always from the suppressed resources of my people. Instead of reading and writing book reports on Conrad and Melville, I read and wrote book reports on Fanon and Wright.

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While attending Jackson, in 1967 I met Maurice Baker (later known as Ahmad Sahir) at the Cosmopolitan Hotel and began a relationship lasting to this very day. We both were dancing at a benefit for the Ebonnaires Black Social Club. Maurice was a carpenter, welder and contractor. Yet, more important to me, Mr Baker was also a hand drummer, an African dancer, a fencer, an archer, a choreographer, a painter, a writer and a philosopher. Before I met Ahmad, my dancing was limited to imitation and mime, that is, trying to be a mirror-image of my teachers. Ahmad wrenched out of my being a character, an African character that longed to express the plight, hopes and struggles for freedom of Black Americans. He gave me direction and brought a form and content to my art, saving it from the indignities of commercialism. Ahmad forced me to confront the polarities between narcissism for money, the 'starving artist' and all points in between. In the words of Amiri Baraka: 'He taught me how. Not steps but the fix of muscle. A position for myself ... to move.'[9]

Ahmad performed a narrative dance called 'Something we lost', and it was after seeing that dance that I sought him out as a teacher. There's a part in this dance where the narrator says, 'and then there were those

who preferred to die by their own hands', and Ahmad runs and jumps up six feet in the air in a suicide dive,* and you really *have* to do this thing, no matter what the surface, you have to do this flying leap and actually crash to the floor on your chest. There's nothing about recovery, it's like you're parachuting and actually collapse on the floor. I'd never seen anything like it. If the dance is choreographed where you live, then you live; if it's choreographed where you die, then you die, and I saw this man really die out there and I said, 'damn!' It was totally mesmerising, totally riveting. I mean, he foamed at the mouth! You know, it's supposed to be all dainty and safe and injury-conscious and smiles, and I'm saying, 'did he get hurt, is he alive?' He jumped up as high as he could and landed on his chest on the floor! And it was not a stage, it was not a wooden floor, it was a cement tile floor. He should have been hurt, but he wasn't. Who is this man? I found out and I found him.

There's a photo of Ahmad and me in what he named the slave ship position. It was a duet and it was about the subjection of man by man, woman by woman, woman by man. In that dance we were together, we fought, we loved, that's the kind of choreography it was. In this duet, Ahmad would put his drum down and do flips, until he was right behind my prone body, held stationary in a taut 'bow' position. He'd roll into position, roll right on top of me, grab me under the chin, lean back, scoot forward and ride me like a hobby horse about twenty feet. Then he'd break out of it into a backward roll and I would follow him, and I'd stay in position on the floor and he'd execute our signature movement, wherein he would be in a 'horse stance' with his heels sliding forward on either side of my undulating body. We founded this technique during one of our thousand improvisatory sessions. These performances were part of his initiating me as a world-class dancer; he wanted to see how much I had and how serious I was.

'Cause when I came to his house I told him I wanted to study with him, he took me into his den, closed the door, told me to get in a horse stance position,† walked across the room and told me to come to him. I said, 'oh sure', and then after about three feet I'm saying, 'huh, this isn't so easy'. So then I had to make it to him, but by the time I get across the room my legs are jelly and they are shaking and spasming, and he says, 'That was good. Come to my rehearsal Tuesday night at 7 o'clock.' So I go out the door, still trembling, and I ran down the streets screaming, 'all right, all right!!'

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* A specific reference to the suicides of the Ibo people who jumped from the slave ships into the swarms of waiting sharks rather than live in shackles. This legend is a standard part of Haitian folklore and performed in African-American companies across the US and Haiti. It was performed by Eno with the Art of Black Dance and Music of Boston in the 1980s.

† Also known as 'the warrior stance' in Pearl Primus's technique, or plié second position turned out in European ballet.

He is the one that made the world a holistic entity for me. It was Ahmad who introduced me to Socrates, Confucius and the Sphinx, taught me about fencing, archery and sculpture. Ahmad was the one who taught me about Charlie Parker, Monk, Roach, Blakey, Miles and Chano Pozo. He was a painter and perhaps his greatest portrait was an image of the two of us in silhouette between Africa and the Americas, face to face, hands clasped, our heads tilted backwards and our faces lifted to the sky.

I would train all the time, as if training for a championship boxing match or the Olympics. Get up in the morning, run to the park, get to the park, run laps, get on one leg, hop on one leg around the track, change legs, then repeat the process backwards, hop backwards, and this was before dawn. So I'd run miles to get there, then keep running, then do push-ups, then this total regimen, then I'd go to school, then after school I'd practise dancing, and *then* I'd do my homework! On Saturdays I'd do the same thing, and I'd practise dancing all day long. So I wasn't really much for social activity. I'd be practising all day long, for what I did not know, I just knew I wanted to be good. I knew I didn't have the greatest talent and I had to practise. So I'd run about three or four miles to rehearsal, I'd rehearse and then I'd run home.

Ahmad had formed a company called 'The Black and Tans Afro-American Revue' and it consisted of his entire extended family: wife, children, brothers and sister-in-law, nieces, nephews and friends. He commanded an entourage of forty people with ages ranging from 5 to 60. They performed popular Black music, using conga drums as their only instrumentation. I joined Ahmad's troupe, the Black and Tans Afro-American Revue; soon I became his principal dancer, choreographer and confidant. For three years, I was personally responsible for choreography and performance in several solo, duo and group dances per performance. We were not funded by any 'established' institution but by our own forty-hour-a-week jobs and whatever community donations we could secure. Most of our performances were benefits for Black charities and causes, like African Liberation Day, Kwanza, Uhuru Day at the Oregon State Penitentiary and numerous benefits for the Albina Arts Center, the only art centre in the Black section of Portland. I danced with and learned from Ahmad Sahir. Even though we are now separated by 2,000 miles, he remains the single most influential person in my life.

He was my first true teacher, though I had had several previous teachers of ballet, jazz and Black vernacular. Nancy Dupay's Dance Studio, in the Portland suburb of Gresham, was where, in 1965, I attended my first formal dance class. Ms Dupay was gracious towards me and gave me a scholarship to attend classes. This scholarship also meant performing for her company recitals, which I did without question. I progressed rapidly and would usually perform two solos

and a group finale, slowly becoming accustomed to dancing in front of all-white audiences and receiving thunderous ovations. To keep me in perspective about my newly-acquired celebrity status, Ms Dupay told me once that she could always go to the corner of Williams and Russell (former hot spot of the Albina area and frequently called the 'low end' or 'ghetto') and find 'anybody who could do what you do'. Being too inexperienced to equate this statement with anything but an objective lesson from teacher to student, I carried on, a little hurt because my constant practising and independent studying did not seem to be obvious to my teachers and fellow students.

The next year, during a Christmas performance at Portland's Veterans' Hospital, I was coming out of the performers' lavatory en route to the stage area, walking down a long corridor passing all the dressing-rooms. While walking past one dressing-room, I overheard someone say, 'now remember, you go on right after the Nigger'. I recognised the voice as belonging to the mother of one of the child performers. I wondered who could they be talking about when, as far as I knew, there weren't any 'Niggers' in the programme. Then it hit me. They were talking about me! I was the only Black in the show! I went straight to the stage, bypassing the 'wings' crowded with on-lookers, and waited for the curtain to come up, tears streaking down my face. I never returned to the Dupay dance studio.

I continued to work on my pliés at home and with a wonderful teacher named Catherine Cassarno at her Ballet Du Lac studio in Lake Oswego. In 1969, I received a partial scholarship to Portland State University. At Portland State I took ballet from Ms Jacqueline Schumacher, formerly of the Royal Ballet. Because of my athletic prowess, Ms Schumacher started me in intermediate ballet and would later suggest that I eventually audition for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre or Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem. I thought that after a projected ten years of further study I should have more than two options. I was still naive about the limitations for Blacks, regardless of overall ability or artistry.

At Portland State University, I studied jazz dance with Cathy Evleshin, a founder of Portland's first resident modern dance company, called the Portland Dance Theatre. Working with Cathy was a mixture of joy and sadness, for, while I was free to dance, choreograph and participate in the newly-formed Portland Dance Theatre, my work was never referred to as 'classical' form but as 'ethnic'. It was connoted as not universal but subjective, and certainly not 'art' but 'craft'. A dancer in the company cautioned me about delving too much into African dance because there was 'no future in it'. Cathy would later tell me that I was 'born' with innate ability, inadvertently negating three generations of in-family education in kinetic expression. Throughout these experiences was a connecting thread of subtle and unconscious racism.

So, even though by that time I had dropped out of my pre-med studies to study dance full time, I found myself without an anchor, without a future and without a path.

It was Ahmad who became my first griot, my first mentor, my first and only renaissance person. He was also an outcast, at the time considered by most people to be an eccentric drunk. To be a Black nationalist dancer in Portland, Oregon, at that time, one had to be very strong, because the first thing one had to withstand was the laughter. Sometimes he'd come to me and he'd cry. He was a strange and gifted man who could go in and out of even opposing groups and, without compromising himself, still be able to speak, still be friends with people and still remain true to himself.

Ahmad was *the* master director. Some people think that if you can tell people what to do and they do it, this makes you a director. Oh no! If this one needed stroking, Ahmad would stroke them; if this one needed to be sat down and talked with, he would sit down and talk with them; if this one needed wine, he'd give them wine; if this one needed to be kicked, he'd kick that one. He got the most out of his people. That's a director. He made them feel like their contributions were appreciated, necessary and valid. I know that there's no democracy in show business and that people think 'director' denotes absolute authoritarianism. But Ahmad was never that way, he was always flexible, always willing to bend and change. That was the secret of his strength and how he got all those diverse people to work for him. They began to deliver for him and in doing so began to believe that they could also deliver for themselves. He had them doing things that they never thought they could do. When we did the 'Knife Dance', we threw razor-sharp machetes at one another, catching them, twirling with them, exchanging them in mid-air over a span of thirty feet on dimly-lit stages. It was a dangerous exhibition which required total concentration, commitment and trust, and it never failed to bring all of the company members to the wings to watch. We did it one time in Seattle at Black Arts West, in the early '70s; the place was dark, there weren't many lights on, and I sliced my hand up with the machete, because I was juggling them and the slightest mistake could spell disaster. Ahmad didn't believe in safety features like some people who put tape over the blades. Other people would be using plastic machetes. He only believed in the real thing. We still did the show. I went down to the hospital nearby but I didn't have an acceptable health card, so they couldn't give me anything but some paper towels to keep me from bleeding on their floor. We eventually found a hospital where I received several stitches and a shot. Afterwards, we returned to the theatre just in time to do the show.

For choreography, we used icons to the point where dances were put together from iconic positions. The slave ship was one of our positions.

We frequently used African sculptures and statues as iconic forces. We started off with iconic positions and *then* we found the dance.

1970s

In 1970, Ahmad and I united with five Black students from Reed College and Portland State University, several community artists and a Reed College teacher of Black art to form 'Ibanduwo'. Ibanduwo, meaning 'pleasure to see, enjoyable to be with', became a sophisticated travelling offshoot of the 'Black and Tans'. Ibanduwo functioned independently for two years and offered classes in dance, music, mask making and graphics through the Albina Art Center. We performed throughout Portland and the Pacific Northwest, and I was privileged to perform dances employing African motifs and movements with Afro-American transitions and phrasing.

On 21 January 1977, I said farewell to Portland with a concert entitled 'Even From Stone'. It was staged at a small theatre with six musicians, a guest poet and myself. This concert was dedicated to my teacher, Ahmad Sahir, and was completely sold out! I received a standing ovation, my first ever in Portland. I remember my mother, Naomi Rhymes, sitting in the front row munching popcorn and talking with other family members who all gathered for the first time en masse to see my last show.

In May 1977, my mother died of leukemia and I received word of my acceptance into the University of Massachusetts. I won't risk melodrama by saying I promised Mom I would graduate, but I did tell her that I would continue to dance. On 19 and 20 August I debuted in Northampton, Mass., with the Unity ensemble at the Hay Loft North Jazz Series.* Forty-five minutes, three dances and three curtain calls later, I was exhausted and happy. I was home.

I know now that I can reach into the remotest chasms of my being for strength, to gain knowledge, to create new directions for myself and for my people. For myself, there can be no people's revolution without a people's culture – a people's dance. Dance not seen on a New York City Broadway stage or at the Metropolitan Opera, but vibrant and live with the smell of cane fields, the scent of sweating bodies meshed in a ceremonial dance; dance with revolutionary thoughts come to life. We are on our own land. We are not exploited or degraded. We know beauty by her first name and need not ask our oppressors for definitions nor approvals; we are free! Not 'free at last' but as always.

* Eno was a guest of Chris Henderson (drums), Sulaiman Hakam (reeds) and Avery Sharpe (bass).

Africa – 1980s

When I was in the Gambia, there were people who honestly did not know that there were people who look like me in this country. They just knew that I was Gambian, and they were very angry when I wouldn't speak any Mandinka or Wolof with them. My teacher* said, 'He wants to know why you won't speak the language.' I said, 'I can't!' He said, 'They don't believe you.'

In the last decades, when I was starting out, the academicians were saying that the Africans don't want the African-Americans, that we are not 'pure' Africans. Ahmad and I were called plastic Africans, cereal box Africans. I was told that the Africans thought of us as hybrids, you know, the weakest of the species, whereas we may be the strongest of the species – we survived the onslaught of the holocaust. It's true, because they didn't bring us over here for the best of luck, and we didn't have the best of doctors' care. It's only the strongest that survived.

I did Yoruba dancing with Babatunji Olatunji, I did some Ghanaian dancing also. They were fine for the group cohesiveness, I could feel those. But I felt that in the dances of the Malian empire, that's where the cut was. That's where you had the influence of the Jihad, Islam coming in with the forceful taking away of the indigenous traditions. You had the Bambaras and Jolas holding on and running further into West Africa, or you had the Bagas (of Guinea, who dance Kakilambe) and the Dogon scaling the Bandiagara cliffs (Republic of Mali) trying to hold onto their pre-Islamic religions that were being killed by Islam. That's the Africa that really points the way, and any path, any resonators to that, in my eyes are good. The traditions of Christianity and Islam, although they themselves may have originated in Africa, are not good because they were used to displace what the Africans already had. To displace Oludumare (Yoruba supreme being), to displace Kakilambe (the Baga supreme being) is wrong. The Africans will tell you that we can have Kakilambe, we can have Jesus, we can have Allah, we can have Buddha, we can have them all, because the human being is a spectrum of all these emotions and feelings, inside and outside. I saw this among the royalty in Senegal. They say, 'I'm Black [holds his hand up, palm inwards], but I'm also white [turns palm outward]. So which am I, if I am both?'

The Fulas are very important; they are not only in Ghana and Nigeria, but also in the Gambia and Senegal, and have been known through the centuries as the acrobatic ethnic group or nation of Africa.[10] One goes to the Fulas to see acrobatics. When we talk about

* Hatab Jatta of the National Ballet of the Gambia was assigned to 'teach me well, or be suspended from the ballet' by its director, M'Baye Chow, and his assistant, Mohamadu Joof, graphically illustrating Gambians' fierce sense of pride and devotion to their dance.

the Jackie Wilson splits, that's Fula dance. They are trained to contort their bodies from childhood, to break apart, to disassemble and reassemble their bodies. They put themselves inside calabashes. They put their bodies into the shape of an external object and then reassemble their bodies after they get out of that object. But it also became a way that the Africans exercised and survived the middle passage, which was the forming of the Limbo. In fact, the Jackie Wilson split is a direct descendant of the Limbo. Physically, the Limbo was also a manifestation of Legba, the Yoruba trickster deity. That's important also because, when we talk about Congolese and Yoruba, we have to talk about the carrying forth of religious concepts.

In terms of feeling and intensity, no one had the package like James Brown. He could sing, dance, play multiple instruments and, like Legba, intersect and embody the sacred (gospel and spirituals) and the secular (blues and rhythm and blues). He still is the king – 'the bishop' is what he was called, but he likes 'the godfather'. Calling him the bishop is in line with our African-American heroes having a religious name which carries back to the African beginnings, i.e., Ray Charles, the originator of *soul* – soul being the secularised version of church music and church dancing, church movement into secular dancing. Ray Charles was called the High Priest. Nina Simone, the High Priestess. James Brown the Bishop. Aretha Franklin is still known as 'The Queen'. A whole hierarchy of religious terms for secular artisans.

When the Africans tell a story they become that story. I learned this directly from Dr Pearl Primus in 1969. When the Mandinkas do the Lenjengo, the bird dance, they are not just imitating that bird, that bird has synergised within their being – they become that bird. It is truly Zen! When we talk about mime, we can talk about the preacher becoming the physical embodiment of that outlawed drum.[11] The preachers were not miming words out of the Bible or miming what God would do, they actually became God, they actually became something that would frighten the congregation, or uplift the congregation, or move a congregation to act. They became 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. This was done through possession, through the strength of their voices, through the drums of their voices. The power of prayer is true power.

In an African context, the secular and sacred intermingle, intertwine and intersect: they are one and the same. One is not defined without the other. You can't have a sacred without a secular. It is in Western thought that these have been divided, but the Africans know that they are one and the same. And this is what is important about my work, why I couldn't see the difference between the blues one night and the gospel the next day.[12] I couldn't see the difference.

Final statement

I've been told all my life that our people are *so* organic, *so* rhythmic, that we *all* dance. Therefore all this guilt that I've carried with me all my life, as far as not going pre-med, not being a lawyer, has been a waste. The guilt I carry of making a choice against the security and well-being of myself and my family, in order to develop my art form to contribute to the society at large. The guilt of being the first in my family to get an advanced degree in higher education, a Fulbright Scholarship, and still not being able to support my family. If all Black people can dance, there was no need for me to do 500 push-ups, 600 jumping jacks, to get up early and run five miles forward and backwards and hop another mile on one foot every day since the age of twelve. There was no need for me to do that because, if all Black people dance, then I would have been this good anyway! There was no need for me to develop the frail body that I had. People ask me, 'how come you dance on your head, how come you do flying splits off stages, or how come you dance on your knees?' I say that 'I want to be just like James Brown, forever imitated, and never duplicated!' I said I wanted a signature that wouldn't be easy to copy. Or if someone copies any one of my signatures, you know that they'll have to bleed to copy it!* People have said to me, 'man, I wanted to try to dance with you, but not that bad man, it hurts!' But it is for greater reasons than self-aggrandisement that I have and continue to take physical risks when dancing: I consciously moulded this body on images that I had, of all the Black images I had in my dreams – Black images doing these forms.

I'm a Black man, an African-American who's dying of AIDS. There is not a day goes by that I do not wonder what that *box is going to feel like*. And what's it going to be like, to have people walking over me and saying good-bye. There are many things that I don't share with people about this illness. For me to be willing and able to carry on in spite of my affliction is the most courageous thing that I've ever attempted in this life. Even though there were many forces against Pan-African dance in 1977 in the Pioneer Valley, in terms of the American Nazi Party, the bureaucratic Five College Dance Dept., there was also a deep pool of receptive students, teachers and community members. Things change, people became more flexible, more accepting and understanding, but revolutionaries do not survive revolutions. I have travelled all over the world, with no money, without knowing any other person when I arrived or a national language, and I not only survived, I ended up teaching, ended up

* The idea of someone 'stealing' a solo was unfathomable to me as Ahmad had taught me that solos are improvisatory and, as such, are continually in a state of fluxual metamorphosis. Together we developed certain 'signatures', not to distinguish ourselves from other dancers, but to extend our own interpersonal language and vocabulary.

learning, and I ended up being praised when I didn't go there for praise. My motive: there is nothing else I know to do. I am inspired, I am empowered by the divine.

It is very important that this video has been completed while I'm still alive and that I was able to have input into its coming together. It is the greatest honour that any human being could ever have, to know that their life has had significance and value in terms of the human fabric going on in a humanistic way, and people coming together and communicating in languages other than fear, exploitation and violence. To paraphrase John Coltrane: I know that there are many forces in this world, but I truly want my work to be a force for good. It is a miracle that I have lived to see this day. As a former drug addict and street person, some things I know could have taken my life, and probably should have taken my life, but I think that we are all here for a purpose and I feel very privileged to have been able to fulfil a portion of mine. God bless you, go with God. *Jama ak Jama* (peace and peace – Wolof).

References

1 Here I am thinking of 'The Big Payback' by James Brown and 'Mississippi Goddam' by Nina Simone, which uncompromisingly confront racism while using Black vernacular forms.

2 Nancy L.C. Ruyter, *Performers and visionaries: the Americanization of the Art of Dance* (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1970), for degree of PhD, p.78.

3 J.G. Birney, *The American Churches: the bulwarks of American slavery* (Concord, N.H., 1885), p.37.

4 The 'Theatre Owners Booking Association', a.k.a. 'Tough On Black Actors'. See Marshall Stearns and Jean Marshall, *Jazz Dance: the story of American vernacular dance* (New York, 1968).

5 Jill Cutler, 'The Eno project', unpublished essay, 1993.

6 David Dalby, 'The African element in American English' in Thomas Kochman (ed.), *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: communication in urban Black America* (Urbana, 1972), p.176.

7 *The Blues Brothers*, starring John Belushi (as Elwood), Dan Akroyd (as Jake), James Brown (as the preacher), Ray Charles, Cab Calloway, Aretha Franklin, John Lee Hooker and Alyo Tolbert, the founder of the Muntu Dance Theater of Chicago.

8 Pearl Primus, *Chujoy Dance Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967).

9 From Baraka's poem, 'The Dance'.

10 See Basil Davidson, *A History of West Africa: 1000-1800* (Harlow, 1990).

11 Eno points to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to illustrate this phenomenon, where 'things' are not only anthropomorphised, but have their own power (*ase* in Yoruba) beyond human control. Here drum, song and dance are forces that people do not enact, but embody as conduits.

12 The merging of Blues and Gospel musical forms, yet the sharp boundaries on where they are performed, is pervasive in United States history. Thomas A. Dorsey, known as 'the Father of Gospel', was also a blues pianist for Ma Rainey. See C.E. Lincoln and C.H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C., 1990). See also Michael Harris's biography of Dorsey (Oxford, 1992).