

ADESOLA AKINLEYE DANCING STRONG

E: ADESOLA@DANCINGSTRONG.COM

MIGRATIONS, LOWRY SALFORD - RAIN DANCING AND SUNDANCING

'Migrations' project Article

I wrote this article for 'Animated Magazine', published 2008

Migrations was commissioned by Manchester International Festival and Ludus Dance.

Rain Dancing and Sun Dancing - Adesola Akinleye

In July I was commissioned to choreograph a piece for The Manchester International Festival and Ludus Dance. The brief was to create a site-specific dance outside the Lowry in Salford with local youth community groups that did not normally access any kind of mainstream dance but that had dance as part of their activities, namely refugee groups and a group of children from the travelling community. The project was called 'Migrations' and sought to acknowledge the Abolition of Slavery Act and celebrate the many ways that today's Manchester community had come together. I was to see each group three times in the process of the creating of the work.

When people leave their homes by choice or by force they may lose everything but history shows they cling to one thing - their dance. From the Ghost Dances that sparked the massacre at Wounded Knee to the secret societies that kept Hula alive to the steps used for disguising Capoeira, people have risked their very lives to protect their dance. Similarly, the groups in the project saw dance as being about the defining of their identity, much more than being about performance. The idea of working towards a large performance piece brought with it issues of national identity - the very questions of how a cultural group finds its place within a large community that plague our newspapers at the moment.

From the brief it was clear the groups would work independently of each other but I made a number of other important choices. Firstly, in my role as choreographer, I did not want to re-choreograph the traditional steps, nor to change or impose on the traditional steps of the groups. I decided instead to focus on how the groups and audience interacted, saw and moved together. I decided the piece should be a promenade performance culminating in a coming together of groups and audience.

Secondly, I saw my role as creating a space where the young people in the groups had the confidence to be themselves dancing - rather than iconic cultural figures. I did not want to create something that merely became an outdoor stage and as a site-specific piece, 'Migrations' could not ignore the added dimension of the beautiful architecture of the Lowry building.

Lastly, I wanted to bring something of my own dance culture to the piece, to share with the groups my dance culture. My dance comes from a number of influences: ballet, West African, Graham, Hip Hop and Native American (Sundance).

I was about to go off to my annual Sundance and it was the Native American traditions I decided to share; particularly the idea that dance / movement can reach not only across place but also across time to bring people together. And the belief in the four directions - the four directions come together to create a whole. You often see this on medicine wheels that have four colours in sections around the edge.

It had been hard to find the groups. Many of the young people in the groups approached did not feel the 'community' was a safe, welcoming place and the idea of dancing in it was not attractive. Finally four groups were identified - Kurdistan Art & Culture, The Duchy Dancers young people from the Traveller community of east Salford and young people from the Duchy Road Estate, The Congolese Support Project and as support The Wirral Youth Theatre Peer Educators. I went to meet with them all separately. We began the process of creating 'Migrations' and it was fraught with the complications of the lives of the groups involved. Each of the three rehearsals I had with each group were precious and attended at great cost with problems ranging from transportation to rehearsal to imminent deportation.

The groups found the idea of a 'community' dance very threatening compared to the isolation and protection of the cultural showcases they were used to. Although the Lowry is a public building the groups felt no ownership. When we met at the Lowry to practice people waited outside (sometimes in the rain).

I had created 'Migrations' as challenging the fourth wall, with the audience sometimes on both sides of the group dancing and sometimes following them as they danced along. The audience started in four different places (four directions). To watch the first group, each audience starting point gave a slightly different view and sound of the dance. The audience followed their own journey watching each group at a time and being drawn along as groups moved. Finally all four audience groups converged in front of the Lowry as the last group danced and guided them into a big circle. Each audience group had colour tape which traced their path and so at the point of the big circle all the different coloured tape also converged. As the last group ended their dance the other groups joined them in the big circle; audience and groups together danced a simple circular pow wow step.

I wanted to challenge the idea of the audience watching the quaint cultural dancers; I wanted the dancers to lead the audience. It was this sense of empowerment that I felt reflected the Abolition of Slavery Act. There was a power shift as there often is when the fourth wall is challenged in theatre. The groups felt this power but they took a lot of convincing that they could grasp it and lead. By the performance they did and beautifully and proudly, very different from the young people sitting in the rain waiting for rehearsal. And the rain was constant!

The pow-wow step at the end was a simple step of four walks forward two walks backward repeated in a clockwise direction. This step was taught to me by Grandma Chipps on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Grandma is 90. She is Lakota, Oglala, Sioux. She explained the dance as being about community; you cannot continually move forward, you take steps back for everyone to catch up. For costumes, each group chose what they wore, most choosing traditional clothes but they were given a particular colour that represented one of the four directions. By the end of the dance, when they all came together in the big circle they represented their direction just as on a medicine wheel.

And during all this it rained and rained every single rehearsal, especially hard during the site specific ones.

Performance rolled around, some costumes weren't ready because they had had to be made by people from 'back home'. Some groups were always late and I was wondering if they would make it. The rain was not holding off and there were a few problems with the site outside the Lowry and some portable loos! All the groups were in the same (dressing) room and what would they think of each other? I was beginning to feel the project was jinxed. What was the point anyway!

I had just checked the tape for the audience was holding up under the deluge of rain and going to check-in with Jacqueline Greaves, Project Manger, when I interrupted a conversation she was having with a Councilor for Salford, Stephen Coen. He was interested in what was going on because it was a community piece. I caught the end of his sentence '...because of the way they respect their elders' as I approached the conversation. Once introduced to me he asked what we were doing because he was interested in community events he had been at the Lowry by chance, at a meeting. He said it may seem strange in Salford but he had a particular interest in Native American Culture. Shocked I said 'Well, let me show you this then' and took him to where the audience paths met. He said 'looks like the four directions!' I invited him to stay for the dance. He said he had been to Pine Ridge to meet the community there. He said Salford had a particular connection with Pine Ridge.

We were standing in the middle of the big circle area and he pointed to the car park opposite us. Just here in what was now a car park from late 1887 to spring 1888, Black Elk, Red Shirt, Buffalo Bill and the Lakota people who were a part of that road show lived there. The road show performed throughout Europe. This was at a time when the Lakota people were refugees in USA, being moved from place to place by the USA government. The Councilor said their tipis were right here and that there are descendents of Lakota people who decided to stay in Salford living here today. We were dancing in the very place they would have danced all those years ago.

I went back to the (dressing) room to find the groups were helping each other, playing music to accompany each other's dances and sharing traditional steps with each other. They performed 'Migrations' with confidence and pride. The audience followed and when we got into the big circle audience and dancers, Congolese, Kurdistanian, Romany, all danced the same steps that had been danced on that land more than a century before by Red Shirt. The steps Grandma taught me, the steps of community.