

## **Between the Archive and Repertoire: Embodied Memory in Stephen Dwoskin's *Ballet Black*, 1986.**

Stephen Dwoskin's 1986 film *Ballet Black* is an experimental documentary about the Ballet Nègres, the first black dance troupe founded in London in 1946 by Jamaican born dancer Berto Pasuka (1917–1963).

Dwoskin came across this little-known story thanks to his close friend, the actor Astley Harvey, who was one of the company's original members and who became a consultant on the film. With Harvey's help, Dwoskin contacted the other members of the company in Britain and Jamaica and organised a reunion party that also features in the film.

This position of 'insider' was clearly important for Dwoskin. In a 2006 interview, he explains how it was this 'personal connection' with the former Ballet Nègres's members that gave him insight into their creative and political intentions. 'Without this connection', he says, 'it would be virtually impossible to recreate the kind of dance, and dance narratives that were so important to their thinking.'

### **1. The Repertoire**

While using some of the conventional tropes of the documentary (the interview, the archival document or footage), *Ballet Black* is all but a conventional documentary. For a start, there are no traditional talking heads. Off-screen voices, often difficult to associate with their speakers, float over a dense visual track composed of various documents: black & white photographs, posters, leaflets and ballet programmes. These archival records are in turn choreographed, typically by being set to the rhythmic thud of beating drums. / A short, narrated section, for instance, restages the light-hearted ballet *Market Place* through a montage of stills, pulsating on screen to the beat of the drums. Repeated flickers of stomping feet visually mimic frenetic dance steps. In another section, a photograph of the ballet *Nine Nights* is reanimated through the camera's jerky pans, that zoom in and cut out figures, expressions and gestures.

Dance is clearly the central element here – both the subject and mode of expression that gives the film its form. As Lucy Reynolds writes, *Ballet Black* threads a 'potent relationship between corporeal motion and the moving image'.

However, dance doesn't inform *Ballet Black* only in terms of movement, but first and foremost as a mode of transmission. This mode of transmission belongs to what performance studies Professor Diana Taylor defines as the 'repertoire': a live and embodied type of performance that is passed on through a non-archival system of transfer. As Taylor puts it: 'the repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of the transmission.'

The importance of such transmission in *Ballet Black* can be witnessed in the restaging of some of The Ballet Nègres's most well-known pieces by a younger generation of dancers who, throughout the film, we see learning, rehearsing and re-interpreting key dances under the direction of the old company's members, especially Richie Riley. Already in the film

proposal that secured him an Arts Council funding, Dwoskin had stated that the behind the scenes rehearsals were to be an integral part of the film and not merely preparatory material. The casting was equally important. Dwoskin and his producer Trish Thomas contacted the performers' union Equity to recruit dancers of colour for the purposes of this restaging.

The film thus documents a transgenerational act of knowledge transfer that does not pass through image and word, but through embodied practice. Memory is not inscribed in external archival supports, but passed on from one living body to another.

*Ballet Black* inhabits this space between the document and the performance, between the 'archive' and the 'repertoire'. The film is in itself an archival record, a form of audio-visual inscription, but its fixing properties are somehow unmoored by the repetition of movements and gestures, and the incremental accretion of rehearsals. The film records a process of bodily transmission, that for its very rootedness in embodiment and presence, necessarily exceeds it.

## 2. The Diasporic

Berto Pasuka, born c. 1917, arrived in London via Paris in 1939. In the early 1940s, he took a ballet course, performed in cabaret shows in West End nightclubs, modelled for sculptors, painters and photographers, such as Angus McBean, and appeared in a handful of films, the most significant being Thorold Dickinson's *Men of Two Worlds*. Made during the war and partly shot in Technicolor on location in what is now Tanzania, some of the footage was lost when a German submarine torpedoed the ship carrying it back to Britain. Pasuka helped Dickinson refilm some ceremonial dances in London in a film studio. It was during the making of this film that Pasuka began to pursue his vision of a Black ballet company in earnest. Some of the dancers for the film became part of his company and he used the money he had earned to hire the Twentieth Century Theatre from their opening season.

Commissioned by the Ministry of Information at the behest of the Colonial Office, *Men of Two Worlds* explored tensions between African religious practices and modern medicine, in the fight against an outburst of sleeping sickness. Participating in the British empire new rhetoric of 'development' and 'partnership', the film's aim was to depict the British colonial presence in Africa in a favourable light, as an enlightened administration that would lead the Africans out of their 'backwardness and superstition'.

The storyline of *They Came*, one of the first ballets – or dance dramas – that Pasuka staged with Les Ballet Nègret, loosely resembles that of *Men of Two Worlds*, yet its approach to the subject of European colonialism and the implications it draws are diametrically opposed to Dickinson's. / Set in Africa, *They Came* is a powerful dramatisation and indictment of Christian complicity in colonial incursions and the history of empire, as well as of the forced imposition of Western medicine and the eradication of indigenous healing practices and forms of spirituality – here symbolised by an African shaman.

Formally, Pasuka's dance dramas are a unique synthesis between classical ballet, cabaret and Afro-Caribbean dance, orchestrated within narrative scenarios that represent black experience across history. As a diasporic artist, Pasuka's approach to dance might be deemed 'syncretic' in the sense elaborated by Kobena Mercer, as it 'critically appropriated elements from the master code of the dominant culture and "creolise[d]" them, dis-articulating given signs and re-articulating them otherwise.'

*Ballet Black* powerfully concludes with a contemporary restaging of *They Came*, whose gestural tableaux we have seen repeatedly rehearsed during the film.

### 3. The Living Archive

Released in 1986, *Ballet Black* inhabits the same historical space as the so-called 'race riots', the SUS laws and the rise in police brutality and anti-immigrant sentiment that was endorsed and stoked up by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Dwoskin's documentary is contemporary to the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, also released in 1986, and like the latter it can be seen as a 'radical rearticulation of the historical archive'. In *Handsworth Songs*, as Jean Fisher points out, testimonial memory (in the form of archival images and recorded testimonies) and the dislocating reverberations of the dub soundtrack, work to disrupt the official narratives of the media archive – with its colonial and racist underpinnings – thus usurping its 'power of authority and to control meaning'.

For bodies who have been historically marginalised, classified and labelled on the basis of their identity – whether racialised, queer, gendered and disabled bodies – the archive in its association with power and authority, warrants suspicion. *Ballet Black* shares this suspicion, and, as an act of resistance, creates an alternative mode of transmission through which memory can be passed on. Breaking the classificatory and static mould of the archive, Dwoskin's fragmented documentary generates what we might call a 'fugitive' movement of knowledge transmitted from body to body. We might say that this fugitive movement produces a different kind of archive: a 'living archive', as Stuart Hall might have defined it. An archive that is 'ongoing, continuing, unfinished, open-ended.'