

By Brenda Dixon Gottschild

In my work I want to get dirty,
acknowledge demons,
hail the angels,
tell secrets,
and celebrate conflicted
complicated,
glorious lives fully lived.

These words, winking in and then fading from the home page of her website, are Cynthia Oliver's "mission statement" for her COCo Dance Theatre. Reading between the lines, we learn a lot about this artist. She wants to bring opposites together and deal with the fallout. To go high and low, inside-out. To get down, down to the nitty-gritty and soar through and beyond a glass darkly. To lift up what or who's been pushed down and speak the unspeakable. And we can guess that "angels" and "demons" will be redefined and reconfigured, in the world according to Cynthia. We can come along for the ride, or we can go the whole nine yards, if we are willing to pay the price and leave our cultural biases behind.

Speaking of angels and demons, it's been a hell of a journey for African Diasporan dance. Up until the 1960s there was really no place for it on the professional concert stages dominated by Europeanist dance. Africanist dance forms were entertainment, not art; Katherine Dunham was expected to show on Broadway, not in Carnegie Hall. (*Note: I use the terms "Africanist" and "African Diasporan" dance to mean works that are African, African-American, or Afro-Caribbean in origin/content/intent/format. Similarly, "Europeanist" denotes works that are of Euro-American or European origin/content/intent/format. Since much of the African continent is in the Western Hemisphere, I avoid conflating Europe with "the West" or "Western" aesthetics.*) We can look upon the achievements of the Civil Rights Era as having pushed the envelope socially, economically, politically, and also culturally and aesthetically. It is then that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre became the ascendant concert dance company (along with others such as the Martha Graham and José Limón groups) to represent the United States on tours across the globe. Cultural riches that had for centuries been relegated to the back of the bus were now openly acclaimed and acknowledged. Jumping ahead to 1984, another milestone is marked with the founding of Urban Bush Women by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Her work marks the rise and recognition of African Diasporan women choreographers as concert dance artists.

If the title of tonight's piece references "ruptured Calypso," we might regard Oliver's creation as a surgical procedure. She's the aesthetic doctor attending to the pathology, not with sutures but with somatic, embodied wisdom, wherein performing, itself, performs the function of healing. Like the surgeon, she is going deeper than the surface, deeper than the received wisdom lodged in our marrow and passed on from our Eurocentric heritage (that tends to imagine the black dancing body as fun-loving and vulgar, if not outright promiscuous). With her footprint stretching from St. Croix to Illinois and points beyond and in between, her dancing body is the repository of multiple cultural codes, black and white and other. Bodies talk, and hers speaks volumes.

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In an interview with the Bride's Lisa Haynes, Oliver says that she often writes first before moving to the studio to improvise around her burgeoning topic. Like her contemporaries Makeda Thomas and Tania Isaac, she draws upon her Afro-Euro-Caribbean roots/routes to interrogate and challenge the conflicted narratives and complex traditions that have made her who she is. Thomas is from Trinidad/Tobago, Isaac from St. Lucia, and Oliver the Virgin Islands. Living primarily in the United States, each woman shares an Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, Euro-American lifestyle in a world of hyphenated traditions. Much of their work is autobiographical, on some level. All three represent a new breed of dancer-writer-researcher who refuses to go the "either-or" route of being either a scholar or a performer and instead opts to dance her writings and research her dances. They hold advanced academic degrees and have experience teaching at universities, giving scholarly papers at conferences, and also dancing and creating choreographies. They belong to a cutting-edge genre—namely, the postmodern African Diasporan dancer-scholar whose work goes beyond the stereotype and the market appetite for clichés regarding the black dancing body. Forget "either-or": they are the "both-and" generation.

"So we're doing a figure-8, with knees bent: stay low!"

This is the instruction Oliver calmly calls out as she teaches a dance class in the summer of 2008 to a devoted group of enthusiasts in London, England. (Check it out on YouTube.) Long, lithe, loose, lanky, lissome—these are the words that come to mind to describe her way of moving. Oliver's voice and manner are cool, cool, while the movement she demonstrates is hot, hot. It's that incredible Africanist "aesthetic of the cool," in which hot and cool are balancing principles that make for the excitement, even ecstasy, felt when seeing or performing Africanist dance. For example, a detached, mask-like face may accompany a body moving with intensity and speed: hot tempered by cool, in other words.

The established ballet canon of leg and arm positions and extensions is a recognizable vocabulary that, while remaining constant, assumes different lives in different historical periods and in the hands of different choreographers. Likewise, there's a canon, a criterion, of African Diasporan dance that assumes different shapes, meanings, and trajectories in different periods and under the direction of specific choreographers. So there's a basic Africanist vocabulary underlying Oliver's work and aligning her to a long history and tradition. The classical ballet canon includes a set vocabulary of arm, leg, leap, extend, and bend positions, and a straight, lifted body reaching upwards—all organized around an upright, vertical spine. The Africanist canon values bent legs returning to and emphasizing groundedness, bodies that move as though they have no bones, torso articulation (instead of alignment maintained in the straight spine), and the high contrast offered by playing hot against cool. We can see both traditions activated in Oliver's work, but the prevailing mode is Africanist.

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One of Oliver's recurrent themes is women enjoying their bodies, embodying their joy—a joy that is beyond happy or sad—a more complex, sometimes conflicted action/reaction that is as much kinesthetic as it is emotional or spiritual. Perhaps call it rapture. Or exaltation. Terms like “sacred” or “secular” cannot adequately account for the fact that the black dancing body can embrace soul and spirit on the dance floor, in the street, in carnival. Spiritual space can be created in commonplace realms. This black female body—and it is African, British, French, Indian, Caribbean, American, European, and more—endures a love-hate relationship with all the cultures to which she belongs, and must contend with ethnocentrism, male patriarchy, female envy, commodification, and self-hatred. At times the conflict between her Europeanist and Africanist streams wreaks havoc in her. At times she has been obliged to engage in a body battle to do what she is told, not what she wants to do, begging the question: what is right, beautiful, appropriate, sane. Nevertheless, she is nobody's victim. She embodies a power that cannot easily be wrested from her. She is as old as the hills and younger than springtime. You can't keep a good woman down!

If my comments seem disjointed, loose-ended—RUPTURED—then I will be grateful and feel I haven't strayed from the intent and premises of Rigidigidim. Ashè!