

Dada Masilo

Moving against the grain

If you wanted to distil Dada Masilo's contemporary dance practice into a single word, "friction" is the one that is the most befitting. On every level this South African dancer and choreographer rubs up against the grain — the grain of history, literature, narratives, classical art forms, dance and gender norms. Physically, ideologically and aesthetically, she disrupts conventions.

Reading (western) history, "against the grain" is, of course, a particularly post-colonial phenomenon that has consumed Africans keen to upturn their relationship to Europe. Within literary and academic circles this phenomenon is often termed "writing back to the empire". In her reworking of such classics as *Swan Lake*, *Carmen*, aspects from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and now Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Masilo's work appears to be in dialogue with Europe's most famous cultural anchors. In her renderings of these works, she creates friction via her delivery, through her fusion of traditional western and African forms with contemporary ones, allowing the sometimes awkward seams between these seemingly disparate cultures to be made visible, while also showing how, in places, the notion of cultural hybridity is an oversimplified and superficial one rooted in advancing difference. Masilo, after all, hails from a country with a history and traditions entangled with Europe and, as such, the lines between cultures and continents are often very blurred.

Masilo doesn't invent friction where it does not exist; rather she is drawn towards the "energy" or heightened awareness that points of friction generate. Often this naturally evolves through her (re)reading of classical forms, as a young dancer deeply interested in learning about them. Although her method of "understanding" almost inevitably involves her rewriting how they have been "written". In other words she does not set out to upturn the classics, but rather is drawn to them, as they remain the foundation of western cultural history, and the time and place from which she confronts them automatically results in a form of deconstruction of the narratives from her point of view: a woman living in a country where patriarchal attitudes manifest in obvious abuse and violence — the friction between the sexes, wrought by unequal power relations. In upturning Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia in her work *The Bitter end of Rosemary*, she delves past the superficial rendering of this infamous female character, highlighting her tragic position rather than Hamlet's. She draws on examples of the way in which madness manifests in women in a Johannesburg township setting, and what might push them into this state.

'When I came back from PARTS and realised how difficult things here (in Joburg) were for women I wanted to talk about them. Just in walking to get a taxi, I encountered incredible abuse. That doesn't happen in Europe. I don't intend to deal with big issues, they just happen organically.'

Women, female characters are her main source of inspiration; she delves into their position in society via her reinterpretation of texts, which perhaps makes her a feminist revisionist of sorts.

'I find that I always have had a bit of problem with how women have been portrayed or I want to go deeper into that character. In *Carmen*, the ballet, I found she is too sweet and then the challenge is to go deep and see what I would find in her.'

Living in South Africa, a country still undergoing radical socio-political transitions since the advent of democracy in 1994, she remains rooted in a context defined by conflict and friction. This second decade of democracy has seen deep seated dissatisfaction with economic and structural inequalities result in protests and marches on the streets, outside government buildings and on university campuses. In a context where statues of colonial figures are being rejected, defiled or removed, a rereading of history and confronting the past from differing positions remains part of the public discourse.

'If I had stayed in Europe, I would never have made the kind of work I make because it is so safe there and everyone is calm. I want to make work with an edge.'

Masilo gravitated towards dance from an early age. At eleven, she began training at the Dance Space, a central training centre and venue in the district of Newtown in Joburg, before attending the National School of the Arts, the only high school with an art slant in the city. However, it was during and after her education at PARTS that this revisionist thrust that has come to define her choreographic work began to emerge, when she created her first choreographic piece entitled *Dying, dying, dead*, which was inspired by *Swan Lake* and eventually evolved into her version of this classic work.

'I performed a lot; I loved being on stage and I knew that was what I wanted to do. Nobody was making work that I wanted to make, so I had to create the work I wanted to dance. There isn't a tertiary institution here (in South Africa), where I could have found the training I needed. I had to go; I needed to get out of my back garden and broaden my mind about dance; explore other works and meet other dancers. What was happening in Europe was completely different. I found my own voice as a choreographer. PARTS was such a big challenge; I found it hard to choreograph. I began working with narrative; I find it difficult to choreograph abstract work.'

A vocabulary consisting of a fusion of dance forms quickly became the mode she adopted; it suited her revisionist approach to the classical works as it naturally paved the way for reinvention or rereading of texts – whether visual or written. This also inherently kept refreshing her work, kept it new.

'You can get stuck in your signature, where you end up plagiarising yourself. You just change the music and costume, but you are doing the same thing over and over. If you work with fusion you have to keep learning new

techniques. With *Carmen*, I had to learn a lot about Flamenco, which I had not done before. This keeps your mind open.'

Masilo is adamant that she didn't find her confidence to choreograph at PARTS but rather "lost my fear." After returning to South Africa after her studies, she set out to find her feet as a choreographer, creating *The World, My Butt and Other Big, Round Things* in 2007, a work tackling abuse of women. She followed this with her take on *Swan Lake* a year later. Performing bare foot and casting Siegfried as a gay man under pressure to perform heterosexual African traditions (paying Lobola for a wife), her version ruffled a few feathers among the ballet world in South Africa and African traditionalists, some of whom maintain that homosexuality is "un-African". This bold production, however, found favour with the cultural intelligentsia and undoubtedly contributed towards her earning the most prestigious prize a young South African can land; the Standard Bank Young Artist for Dance.

She created a rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* with the funds the prize confers on winners. In this adaptation she recasts the gender of the character Tybalt, and street dance forms such as hip-hop are introduced into some of the scenes where contemporary displays of masculinity are given expression. It is not always the friction between the sexes that Masilo is interested in but the friction between the gender stereotype and expectations in relation to a shifting world, where gender identity is no longer stable. Her recasting of Tybalt provoked debate about the "empowered" woman — did she simply replicate the behaviour of a man and if so did this not simply perpetuate patriarchy? The classical texts provide the ideal platform to present gender stereotypes while her contemporary revisionist approach introduces the conflict surrounding the recasting of them.

'The freedom is there to play with these (gender) roles and the dance studio is a safe place to do it. I do push the audience to the point where they might feel uncomfortable. I am not in the arts just to entertain; you need to make people aware of certain issues. I make work because I want to make people feel. Dancers like to dance. But artists see what is going on, and incorporate that into the work. I have a lot to learn about becoming an artist, and I am always testing how far I am willing to go. You are never just an artist. It's about the boundaries; how far can I push and can I push more? It is a sick industry really. Dancers are sick,' she says laughing.

Being an artist demands a level of immersion in the production, the roles; this is what allows the work to live on stage, she says.

You have to put yourself out there and be completely vulnerable and honest. You are laying everything out for everyone to see. I can be on stage and move my body, but if you have to allow everything to hang out, this is what makes you vulnerable. I have performed the rape scene in *Carmen* for 52 shows. It starts to hurt; why am I doing this to myself? Making art is about being honest with your feelings.'

In this way, sometimes the element of friction in Masilo's work is one that plays out within herself as she wrestles with what she has created. In performing her creations over and over during a tour, she is forced to find new ways into the work, and ultimately, herself.

A state of inner conflict may explain her dance signature, which is defined by rapid jolts, or quivers. Writers have been challenged to describe the character of her unique gestures. Metaphors are sometimes helpful; she shudders like a butterfly hovering over a flower. This characteristic of her dance also evokes the notion of friction, in that its appearance suggests she is pushing up against an invisible boundary. Certainly the speed with which she moves implies a rejection of classical delivery, which is always so measured and slow.

'I like to dance fast. I always wanted to. At PARTS I had this class with David Zambrano and the dancing was fast and that is where my love grew for that. At the moment it is my thing.'

Her distinctiveness as a dancer has to some degree made her shy away from collaborations with other choreographers. Her most notable collaboration was with the world-renowned visual artist William Kentridge. She collaborated with him on *Refuse the Hour* and the *Refusal of Time*, a five-channel video installation with a moving sculpture and immersive soundscape, which debuted at Documenta 13. It helped that Kentridge's vocabulary is also grounded in theatrical conventions, yet Masilo found the collaboration challenging due to it being geared towards perfecting a performance.

'It was interesting stepping into another world. I was looking for something different to do. Film plays a role in dance but creating a dance for film was different. It was about manipulating the dance to try and get something perfect and that is not what I am drawn to. The imperfections are what become exciting. What will go wrong and how will I save that moment and fix it? It was like performing a dance work without an audience, perfecting it and then blowing it up and watching it over and over.'

Collaborating with Kentridge brought into sharp relief the fact that Masilo enjoyed performing live and the risks that that entails. This is ultimately, why she privileges dancing over choreographing.

'I create the work because I want to dance it. I am not comfortable watching my own work. I want to go through what everyone is going through. I am more passionate about dancing than choreographing. I do it because I want to dance. I love to dance more.'

Mary Corrigan

Years at PARTS: 2004 -06

Dada Masilo grew up in the impoverished neighbourhood of Soweto, where she was born in 1985. She studied classical and contemporary dance in South Africa, followed by two years at PARTS. Combining her training with the traditions of African dance, she established a unique signature, captivating audiences with reworkings of major classics from the Western dance repertoire. She founded her own company in 2008 and became a celebrity in South Africa, and soon afterward became a star on the international scene. She has created a dozen choreographies and is the recipient of two awards. The work of Dada Masilo is now internationally recognized for her iconoclastic and mixed heritage vocabulary.

List of selected works:

Swan Lake

Romeo and Juliet

Carmen

Death and the Maiden

The Bitter End of Rosemary, based on Ophelia

Dancing with Dada

Infecting the city

Swasey Chapel

Good memory: 'Being with the students was great; being with people from all different places and traditions that was fantastic we learnt so much about each other. The school allowed me to create this tool-box: I still haven't used everything in this tool-box. When I am stuck, I open it up and see what I haven't tried.'

Less good memory: 'It was such hard work. Such long hours; 8am to 6pm.'