

# Elizabeth Matinetsa Mongoma

## Memories Find Their Way

Interview by Jette Bastian

*Here in Denmark you are considered to be one of the best dancers from Africa, how did you start?*

It is difficult for me to say when I actually began to dance. Since I went to school from the age of ten and further on through college, I had drama and dance as a subject of study. But it was not African dance, rather modern dance in a free style. My family's traditions and rituals are the background for my own dance. Rituals and dance were part of all kinds of different events. Learning simply happened by watching the elders and imitating them. I started to dance by copying what I saw. Then I met a Dane in Zimbabwe and got married to him. I was twenty-one when I moved to Denmark and had to learn Danish. I decided to return to college in order to learn about Danish present culture and history.

Most of what I have done could seem to be accidental. But I have always kept my interests focused and I have worked hard. I cannot call myself a good dancer, even if people say so of me. I mostly consider myself as an actor. I think it has to do with the fact that, although I am closely connected to dance, I chose acting myself. I feel at home acting at the same time as it is a wonderful challenge for me. Maybe if I focused on dance I could also become a good dancer in my own eyes. I compare myself to professional dancers who have trained in their technique since they were children and I know that I have much to learn. On the other hand I have noticed that some dancers who really master technique often lack feelings and in my case feelings are more patent.

When I came to Denmark the African dance troupe Calabash Dancers needed some female dancers and I was enthusiastic at the idea of dancing. The group's choreography originated from different countries in Africa: Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Senegal and Zimbabwe. Each dancer taught their homeland dances. I was in Calabash Dancers for ten years and I learnt a lot with them. Then I started to develop my own dance from Zimbabwe. Little by little all I had learnt as a child came back to me. I also

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started teaching dance at schools, music conservatories and festivals in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

*When you began to teach yourself did you need to structure the teaching differently to how you had been taught?*

I have a different way of moving and my teaching is just as different. I cannot coach precisely in the same way as I was taught, especially when it concerns dances from other countries. I have explained this to my pupils and made clear to them that the interpretation of the dance is my own. Anything else would be disrespectful. For example, when I had to teach a dance from Ghana that shows women fetching water and being together it was reasonably easy for me because the background is the same as in Zimbabwe. But the movement technique is not the same. For example the hand movements in Ghana and in Zimbabwe are completely different; although the story can be understood immediately, the choreography varies. Identical stories are told with different movements depending on the country and on the tribe. In West Africa hands, arms and legs are lifted more. In the south both legs are kept on the ground and the hips are moved more.

*Have you created your own variations of the traditional dances you have learnt? Do you improvise over the original themes and choreography, or is your dance tradition bound?*

If I perform a dance from Tanzania with my group, I follow the structure precisely as I learnt it. But when I dance with the music, and the dance is not specific, I can combine the steps and make my own variations. I can improvise along the way. If I dance a ritual dance from Zimbabwe, I have great respect for both the ritual and the dance, and it is

important for me to present it rigorously. For example, some movements may be done only by women or by men. Women do not dance like men and if they do one wonders why. Our dance has a specific meaning and the roles are important. The same is true for ritual dances, some of which are based on a story and some not.

We dance to evoke the ancestors when something is out of balance in the village or in the family. We gather and hold a ritual feast. We use the typical Zimbabwean instrument, the mbira, made of a resonance box with attached pieces of metal as strings, for a particular circle dance. Some dancers, who move in a characteristic way, become possessed and go into trance. The ancestors manifest themselves through them. As soon as we hear the mbira we associate the sound with a certain kind of movement. When I started to dance my homeland dances in Denmark, it was difficult because there were no musicians from Zimbabwe there and the musical association was missing. But in United African Ballet there is a musician from Zimbabwe and it is lovely to sing and dance together with him. Through our jam sessions more dances have come back to me.

Now I no longer teach. I dance and make children's theatre with the Bantaba group, with Tchando Salvador Embalo, singer, guitarist and composer from Guinea Bissau, Ayi Solomon, percussionist from Ghana, and Nana Ossibio, bass player and percussionist from Ghana. After the performances we show the children some steps and we dance together. We go to three schools a day and perform African tales.

*Here in Denmark a particular dance is judged in relationship to the school and teacher it has been learnt from. In your case was the learning spontaneous?*

Originally my learning of dance was spontaneous and, if I still lived in Zimbabwe, I don't

think I would have ended up dancing professionally. I would have done design following up the studies I had done in England. I had no idea that dance and acting were something I could have as a profession. But chance pushed me in that direction when I moved to Denmark where the response was so exceptionally good it stimulated me to work hard to become better. My background is different from other Africans in the United African Ballet. I have studied different crafts, while they only worked with dance and theatre. It has been their life.

Often dance and music is the easiest access to work for Africans abroad. Now and then when we perform theatre in schools I hear people say that they could do with more dance and music, so I realise how important it is that we show how much more we have to offer. In the light of this I have written a play for the group to give Danish people a more detailed image of African art.

Foreigners often do not comprehend the story described in a dance because they don't understand the narrative of the movements. They experience a power on stage, but they cannot identify the language of the movements. The exchange is more directly linked with the mimic qualities of theatre. For example in the Bantaba performances we have chosen to speak our individual African languages, but there is an understanding of the action anyway. I think Africans must consider this when they make shows. They must vary the exchange from the stage much more. I myself have felt the need to break out of prejudices more, like the prejudice of expectation that, even before I have said anything about myself, makes people take it for granted



Elizabeth Matinetsa Mongoma. Photo: Lars Colberg

that I am there to dance.

In modern times, in the '70s and '80s, choreography has become freer and used for entertainment both inside and outside of Africa. Before we did not have choreographers in a strict sense. We did not even really have a "public" and therefore there was no focus on choreographic creations or similar manifestations. National dances have flourished in connection to political visits and the exchange of spectacular forms between countries, between Africa and Europe, has developed

with tourism.

*How do you respond to the statement that in Africa music seems to have a stronger role than theatre?*

I cannot answer this question as I don't know where this information comes from. We use music for everything: we work accompanied by it, we communicate and express ourselves through it. In the western world one goes to a psychologist, when one has problems, while music is what helps us. When we are sad and when we are happy, for weddings, for everything, we sing together. Music is a wonderful form through which to express oneself, it makes one feel good in the soul and body, like a big release of laughter.

It is wrong to think that there is more dance and music than there is theatre in Africa. I must ask you please to excuse me, but the expectations towards Africa and Africans sometimes irritate me, because one forgets that we have had theatre as long as there have been human beings. Maybe it was not on organised stages as we know them today, but I certainly experience our tradition of dramatising the correlation of things for each other as theatre. Not so much is known about it in Europe where in general music and dance is expected. Of course if you ask an African for music and dance it is what you will mostly get.

Theatre in education is an old tradition that shows, through game and repetition, how different human situations can be tackled. Books have only recently been introduced; until then we always communicated through theatre, music, storytelling and dance - and we still do.

As far as I know, Africa has had just as strong a theatre life as Europe has. As a child I saw theatre in halls, churches and schools, where I learnt about drama. There are stages in the ghettos, but we do need more theatre buildings in the towns. At most there is one

there, which often presents the white people's theatre.

*How has it been for you as a woman to establish yourself as a dancer? Have you had advantages as a woman or do men have advantages over you?*

It is difficult for me to say if it is different, because I am a woman. I am not a man. There are not so many women from southern Africa who dance, and in a way this has been an advantage for me. In Norway and Sweden I experienced that pupils who had only had men as teachers were very happy to have the possibility of learning a woman's dance from a woman. It was an honour for me to be one of the first to show the women's movements. Now and then it was hard, because the expectations were extra big when a woman finally showed up.

There is a tendency to ask for quick solutions though, and this is one of the reasons why I stopped teaching. I felt that more was asked for than was given. "Give, give, give what you have in Africa, so I can take it and show it to others and earn money that way". Of course I also met people who took the time to learn the background history.

To speak and inform my pupils about life in Zimbabwe is gratifying for me. Those pupils who were too busy did not learn the subject well enough to go on with it. Some came with notebooks and asked me to draw the movements, but that was too greedy and technical for me. Perhaps I am too ambitious in thinking one should go properly into the things one is dealing with.

*Can it have anything to do with the kind of people you direct yourself to?*

Maybe. I may also have been hard. If you ask the pupils you will hear that I have not made compromises. I lacked the social engagement of the pupils, that they should give something

of themselves. Only a few understood the necessity of a social exchange.

I can live from other things, I don't "need" to live from dance. Therefore I think the drive has been different for me than for others. Some pupils gather in associations to learn African dance and they are different from the ones who participate in open workshops. Then there is the woman who has met an African man and wants to show him that she is interested in his culture. It has been a pleasure to teach professional dancers and actors, because they are present with life and soul and they know who they are and what they want.

*How would you describe the way you approach a role? Are you using a specific technique?*

In the show we perform now I play both a mother and her child. A child is born and the parents want her to marry a man in the village, but she does not want to; she wants to marry a fish. She finds a lovely fish in the sea that teaches her to sing. When I play the part of the girl who grows up and finds the fish I identify with the role and I forget Elizabeth. I feel the part I have to represent on stage at that point. The old mother becomes me. The inner images I use in the role of the mother are taken from my own mother. I follow her into her village, where she dances and feels. The girl I find through my memories, my own movements and feelings as a child. I get hold of it quickly as I have easy admittance to my feelings and imagination. When I took over the part in the beginning, I tried to follow the other actor's form, but she was a completely different type from me. Afterwards I followed my own vision and during the training we quickly found a new rhythm together. My new impulses could be used. The process was based

on instinct and impulses. I wanted to improvise and I was very clear about the tasks involved.

*What are the differences between working with a group and on your own?*

I do not perform alone, but I could think of doing so, especially with stories and lyrics told in the African way, which is to say with the whole body. I must always be active and preferably do something new and challenging. I have a fire in my soul, I feel now and then that I have so much energy that I take too much on. I work on directing that energy to fields where it gives fruit and gain. Sometimes I feel that I am at a level that others have difficulty in understanding. Alone I must work through it to show the results, because only that way does what I have to give really come out to the other people.

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

ELIZABETH MATINETSA MONGOMA (Zimbabwe/Denmark) is an actor, choreographer and dancer currently presenting performances with the Bantaba Group. She has performed in various groups and projects ranging from United African Ballet to a television series, and has worked as graphic designer and costume maker. She moved to Denmark at the age of twenty-one.