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From Club to Stage: The Integration of *House Dance* within Performance Practice

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Abstract

House Dance has been part of the *House* scene in New York and Chicago since the late 1970s and early 1980s. This vernacular dance technique has made its way from the underground clubs of the United States of America to the dance studios of London, United Kingdom. The style has also gained prominence in television, and has been, and still is, showcased in popular talent shows. It has an international following and is used for choreographic works for the stage. Using an ethnographic approach, the dance technique of *house*, music, and culture are presented in this study. Principles of Africanist aesthetics are utilised to explore how this social dance and the culture have been shaped. Uchenna Dance Company forms the case study, and the article explores how choreographic methods are applied to the technique, in order for transference to the stage. Conclusions are drawn about methods employed to avoid the misappropriation of the style with the company's choreographic practice.

"Can you feel it?
(Jack, jack, jack your body and feel the bass)
In the beginning there was Jack, and Jack had a groove
(Jack variation into the farmer living off the vibe)
And from this groove came the grooves of all grooves
(Farmer variation lets hurdle into those beats)
And while one day viciously throwing down on his box
(Skating around the floor interacting, exchanging)
Jack boldly declared: "Let there be House" and House music was born"

Heard and Roberts (1998)

The quote above is an extract of song lyrics from one of my favourite *house* tracks, *Can You Feel It?* It is an influential *house* record by Larry Heard and Chuck Roberts. The lyrics and the bass line are what really moves the soul and gets into the body. Before you know it, you are jacking your body, skating around the floor, interacting and exchanging with the people around you in the club. Freestyling and vibing to this song using *house* dance technique could be described as an ephemeral exchange, however, the amount of time taken to perfect the flow and the delivery of these *house* dance steps have taken years to perfect. *House* dance evolved in the underground clubs of Chicago and New York with the development of *house* music, electronic music with a rhythm set in a 4/4 tempo (Bidder, 1999: vii). The dance form has been around since the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it is still perceived as an emerging dance style in the United Kingdom. It is a social vernacular improvisational dance style with its roots stemmed firmly in African American dance culture. The style has also progressed into a technique taught in studios across the world, and here in London, and is also studied as a primary style of dance in the University of East London's Bachelor's degree, Dance: Urban Practice. It is prominent in the commercial dance world and the style is further showcased in television programmes such as *The X Factor* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. *House Dance* vocabulary is to be found in choreographed sets and in music videos like *Jack* by Breach (2013) and *Yeah 3x* by Chris Brown (2010). It is a style that has grown in popularity in the United Kingdom in the last five years, and it is currently used by choreographers and companies such as Clara Bajado, Victoria Igbokwe, Uchenna Dance Company (UDC), Wanted Posse and In Da Club, for stage works across the globe.

The movements in *house* dance are definitely rooted in the foundational steps that the first and second generation *house* dancers, like Brian Green, Archie Burnett, Conrad Rochester, Barbara Tucker, Brahms "Bravo" LaFortune, Marjory Smarth and Ejoe Wilson helped to refine (*Check Your Body at the Door*, 2011). There is a lot written about *house* music and its origins, and about the dancers who 'work it out' on the dance floor (Fikentscher, 2000: 64), yet the main focus when discussing the role of the dancers in this culture is read using Turner's concept of *communitas* (Sommer, 2009: 286). Rietveld mentions "Jacking" as a type of sexualised dance movement made to the music, but very little has been written and discussed about actual *house* dance vocabulary and how it has developed into a recognised dance technique within club culture. Using an ethnographic approach as a qualitative research method, this article discusses the development of *house* dance technique whilst examining how African-American culture and Africanist aesthetics have shaped the style and its

foundations. Using Uchenna Dance Company as a case study, the purpose of this article is to investigate how an improvisational underground club dance can be utilised and developed for choreographed works performed on the proscenium arch stage.

House Dance, What's That?: A Brief Background and Personal Perception

> I couldn't begin to tell you what house is. You have to go to the clubs and see how people react when they hear it. It's more like a feeling that runs through... It's gonna be hot, it's gonna be sweaty and it's gonna be great. It's honest to goodness, get down, low down gutsy, grabbin type of music. (Thomas in Creekmur and Doty, 1995: 437)

Goodnight Mr. Lewis | This Sunday Paradise Garage + Larry Levan Tribute. (Photographer unknown, 2014)

When trying to describe *house dance*, the movement is never the sole focus. The quote above was an answer from an interview taken by Sheryl Garratt with artists from a leading *house music* label of that time, DJ International. The artists can barely control their enthusiasm for the music and also refer to the bodily reaction of the listeners when they hear the music; this solidifies that the music and dance are one entity. So how did that bodily reaction, "Jacking", grow into a codified dance technique and where did it start?

From *Waack* to *Jack*

House music's precursor was underground disco music, specifically New York disco music from the 1970s (Rietveld, 1998: 99). The music was played in clubs with a predominantly gay African American crowd. It had the four to the floor bass beats (where the bass drum hits on every quarter-note beat), with the majority of the songs falling approximately into the 115-130 beats per minute range. In the underground clubs, the music was often sped up so the music was fast, and so was the dancing. On the West Coast, Black and Latino gay men were embodying disco music and *Waacking* to the beats; no, this is not a euphemism but a style of dance made up of fast flicks of the wrists, arms rolls, footwork and poses. Hollywood movie stars such a Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell influenced these men and the poses were efforts to emulate the stars' glamorous femininity. Examples of the dance can be seen on *Soul Train,* but the style was toned down, as gay culture was a taboo subject at that time. A good example of the style is found in Diana Ross's hit, *Love Hangover* (1976) performed in Las Vegas (drpeppa1906, 2007). Dancers such as Andrew Frank, Tinker Toy and Lonny Billy Goodson demonstrate *Waacking*, along with other styles of dancing that are often seen in the underground clubs. The dancers perform choreographed unison sections, along with individuals, pacing the stage with flares of occasional kicks and spins.

The main point to note is that everything was beat orientated. Wall states, when discussing Northern Soul dancing, "the recording's structure provides the framework for the execution of the dance (Wall, 2006: 437). The dancers knew every note of that song and were able to calculate what technique to use in the most appropriate places in the record's structure. This has developed in *house dance* and dancers, today label this as musicality; making the music visible with movement. This is an identifiable trait in social dances (which is to be discussed later in this article). The iconic film *Saturday Night Fever* was released in 1977, and disco emerged into the commercial market and gained popularity. In that same year, Paradise Garage opened in New York with Larry Levan as DJ. DJ Frankie Knuckles was brought to Chicago where he brought the sounds of New York to the famous club, the Warehouse. Disco was gaining notoriety in the commercial world; however, the sounds of the clubs were a lot earthier. Both clubs were to have a massive impact on the dance music scene, but it was from The Warehouse that *house music* took its name. The clubgoers wanted to buy what was being played at The Warehouse and would hunt for the records on vinyl stating they wanted the sounds of

The Warehouse. Later the club's name was abbreviated to 'The House' and the term *house music* was coined.

Unfortunately, disco came under heavy scrutiny in 1979 and fell into decline. Although artists such as Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor were gaining prominence in disco music, there were a lot of non-disco artists that were jumping on the disco bandwagon and releasing disco-infused music. Radio stations like WDAI-FM were switching from rock to all-disco formats and sacked one of their rock DJ's, Steve Dahl (Vettel, 1979). Some thought that disco was consuming the music industry and were eager to participate in the disco demolition rally at Comiskey Park, Chicago on July 12th 1979. Dahl was the front man and promoted the "Disco Suck's" movement on WLUP-FM (Vettel, 1979). Disco was dying in the commercial world, nevertheless the underground scene was still dancing to its sounds; the term was becoming unfashionable and the label "Dance Music" eventually replaced it.

With disco giving DJs long percussive breaks in the music so they could mix and blend tracks smoothly into each other, the sound in the underground clubs was changing. The lavish string arrangements were switching to the experimentation of synthesized effects that produced sounds that were not heard before (Cheeseman, 2003). This change would spark an evolution in the way the dancers moved and expressed themselves. In New York, Larry Levan was shifting from the sounds of disco, turning his hand to studio mixing and in the early 80s shifting into music production. By the mid 1980s his sets at the Paradise Garage were fusing Chicago and New Jersey *house* (Bidder, 1999: 204). It seems that there was an evolution happening in the music in both states but there are a few conflicting theories about where *house music* really originated from. Tim Lawrence states, "House wasn't born this way. Not in Chicago, at least... the Warehouse had no direct role in the house music that emerged as a distinctive musical genre from 1984 onwards" (Lawrence, 2005), whereas Anthony Thomas believes, "Chicago's Warehouse ([was] the birth place of house music)" (Thomas, 1995: 438). Cheeseman (2003) and Lawrence (2005) both agree that Frankie Knuckles laid the groundwork for *house* DJ's but was not the "Godfather of House". They argue that the most influential *House* DJ causing the *house* explosion in Chicago was Ron Hardy who spun at a club called The Music Box.

Constant conversations arise which pursue the origins of the dance form, some stating that Chicago and New York were both doing "Jacking" (the original name for the dance they did to *house music*) but Chicago just named it. Others believe *house dance* was born in Chicago's The Warehouse as a raw dance form and New York picked it up and polished it. With so many conflicting theories about the music and the dance, it is

easy to forget the music and dance are not separate entities but are one. It is really hard to make a solid case that a sound or dance move can ever really originate solely in one place. Media, modes of communication and travel would have made the dissemination hard to record. *House music* was specifically made as dance music, purposefully engineered to keep people dancing. With baseline tempos of around 125 to 130 beats per minute and a four to the floor kick drum, *Jacking* was the natural response to this new dance music in many parts of the globe.

House Dance Fundamentals: What Makes *House*, *House*?

In *house* dance there are a group of fundamental steps that define the form. There are many different variations of these steps and foundations due to the improvisational nature of the form. Globalisation has had a great influence in the way the style has evolved, but there is a misconception that anything can be done as long as you are dancing to *house music*. House is about self-expression, but understanding and linking your expression to the fundamentals of house is the key.

Jacking is the main foundational element of *house dance*. It evolved from the, "well-chosen rhythmic patterns that gives the music a hypnotic and powerfully kinetic thrusting, permitting dancers to extract the full tension from the music's beat" (Thomas, 1995: 443). The original way of *Jacking* was with a partner or up against a wall. It was full of sexual energy pulsating to the beat of the music. The *Jack* is the heartbeat of *house dance* and is led by the pelvic thrust, which is the launch and recovery of the dance. It engages the entire body from the foot to the crown, but the original sexualised movement has been calmed. *Jacking* is a feeling of manipulation; manipulating the energy and music by gathering it up from the snare and releasing it on the hi-hat; gathering the energy from the ground into your body, expelling it through the crown of the head expressing your emotions whilst playing with dynamics, tempos and levels. There are different ways to *jack*, some *jacks* undulate up the body and others pulse with a backwards emphasis; based on your personal movement style the body tells you which *jack* it prefers. The *Jack* inspired many *house dance* artists to create tracks such as Chip E's *Time to Jack* (1985).

Footwork takes influences from jazz, tap and bebop to name a few. It demands fast feet and with its influences, movements commonly performed such as the tip-tap-toe, loose legs, hurdle and the *pas de bourree* with a twist are executed with the grace and air reminiscent of the Nicholas Brothers, Gene Kelly, Gregory Hines and Savion Glover. This aspect of *house dance* lies open to the repetitive rhythmical explorative virtuosity most freestyle dancers crave. For a dancer to hit a rhythmical pattern in

the music with their body is of great pleasure to watch and to perform. The repetitive development of movements allows the spectator to travel through the path the dancer creates, keeping them on the edge and urging the dancer to hit the climactic capacity of those movements.

Performing, repeating and developing these rhythmical sequences allow the dancer to "travel through several altered states" (Welsh-Asante, 2010:16). Welsh-Asante writes about reaching transcendence to communicate with the ancestors to receive valuable information and is usually associated with trance-like states. *House* culture is linked to trance-like states usually in connection to drugs like LSD. There are many dancers that do not touch any hallucinogenic drugs who mention that when they freestyle occasionally they go into a zone. Welsh-Asante points out that the repetition of movements is the key to reaching a transcendent state. I would argue that the repetitive nature of certain rhythmical phrases in *house music* is also a key factor to achieving transcendence in *house dance*. When in the zone, movement expression pours out of the dancer's soul. The connection between body and music is intrinsic and time is not a factor in regards to energy. The movements that are performed are of great value to the dancer's development as in that zone the individual pushes the boundaries of their ability.

Lofting has become a fundamental element of *house* and refers to the floor work, which showcases large acrobatic movements such as the swan dive. This element of *house dance* is said to have originated from the private Loft parties held at David Mancuso's home. Whilst observing *lofting* you may mistake it for elements of *b-boying*. There are similarities but *lofting's* style is more fluid and focuses on demonstrating smooth and controlled movements. It is quite similar to *capoeira* and portrays the fluid flow of water. Unlike *jacking* and footwork, which experiment with dynamics and tempos of the music, *lofting* started as an element that danced through the beat and has a strong spatial explorative theme. The current evolution of *lofting* has seen a development in dancers experimenting with echoing the sharp musicality they use in their standing movements in their floor movements too. Floor work with occasional musically led accents with room for exploration, seems to be moving towards being fully led by the structure of the music.

In all the above categories, *Jacking, Footwork and Lofting*, the connection with the ground is vital and is a connection that can be linked to some African cultural dance practices: Germaine Acogny speaks of her technique being, "rooted in nature" (Jason, 2013) and when delivering workshops urges the dancers to tap into nature's energy and live. Kariamu Welsh-Asante (2010: 13) refers to the respect of the earth in the dances of Africa, especially in harvest dances that give thanks for the fruits of

the earth. The connection to the ground in *house* dancing is paramount as the invisible push and pull creates and provides pockets of energy. These pockets can be tapped into so the consumption of energy is effective and not wasteful. Knowing how to react and connect to the ground's energy is an aspect of *house dance* that is overlooked. The effect often makes movements look too bouncy. Within pedagogic practice, the innate connections and the respect of the ground's energy need to be taught. Grounding is always spoken about as assumed knowledge, but can rarely be explained by students, and has to be danced to be experienced. Jazz, tap, *b-boying*, *capoeira* and Latin dance are styles that have had an effect on *house,* but the main influential style one can identify is African dance practices. "The back is very important in the movement but also the grounding you get from African dance" (Igbokwe, 2009). Not only do movements such as the "jack" and the "farmer" share similarities with African movements like chest pulses, Maasai warrior jumps and rhythmical foot stomping, so do the repetitive rhythms of the drums. These rhythms give dancers gaps between notes, and "by focusing on the gaps rather than the beats the dancers at the Warehouse found much more freedom in terms of dancing possibilities, a freedom that permitted total improvisation" (Thomas, 1995: 443).

Improvisation is the key in both dance forms. African dance and *house* dance thrive on the, "spontaneous and simultaneous exploring, creating and performing" (Blom and Chaplin, 1989: 6). In *Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing*, Jonathan Jackson (2001: 40) highlights Marshall and Jean Stearns explanation that, dances of the African Diaspora, "place great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression." In *House* dance we consider the physical improvisational interactions as an adult version of play. Learning through play has been identified as an effective way of passing and improving skills. It also offers opportunities to focus on transition and is of direct correlation to rites of passage dances in African culture. Welsh-Asante (2010: 15) describes these dances as often representing a transition or transformation with the dances demonstrating detailed footwork all the way to hip movements. My rite of passage into *house dance* when entering the circle for the first time, gave me the opportunity to transition from a *house baby* to a *Kid of house* (Thomas, 1995: 441).

Jackson states and Sommer (2009: 287) reiterates, "the goals of the house-head are to be a part of the group yet still maintain a sense of individuality." We, the dancers share movements but add our own "flava", our emotion, and our personal flare. We attempt to achieve a personal best to influence our peers and provoke them to emulate and improve our variations; therefore creating a cycle that is continually in motion. As

improvisation is, "a way of tapping the stream of the subconscious without intellectual censorship" (Blom and Chaplin, 1989: 6), this exchange is of paramount importance and assists in presenting a stimulus for these playful exchanges.

This mixture of music, dance, and community creates the *house dance* vibe, which Sommer (2009: 285) describes as "an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light and physical/psychic energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation. The vibe is an active, exhilarating feeling of 'nowness'". The maestro of this community is the DJ. Lawrence (2009: 205) and Fikentscher (2000) both discuss the importance of the communication between the dancer and DJ in order to create the "Peak". Fikentscher (2000: 41) states that the DJ aims to peak the dance floor at least once during the evening and the dancer, drawing from personal experience, waits for "the/their/that song". That is the moment the dance floor ignites and personal individual expression through *house* culture is truly alive.

Like call and response between the drummer and the dancer in African dance, the DJ assesses the dancer's connection to the music. "A good DJ did not only lead dancers along his or her…preferred musical path but would also feel the mood of the dance floor and select records according to this energy" Lawrence (2009: 205). Ajayi (1989: 5) explains that in the Yoruba recreational dances of Nigeria, the best compliment is when the master drummer plays exclusively for a dancer. Through my practice in UDC we have danced in pieces that have used drummers. UDC and Vocab Dance's choreographer Alesandra Seutin along with Akosua Boakye joined forces to create a three-minute piece under the name ADiaspora Collective for Sky 1's programme *Got to Dance* series 3, 2012. The piece used live drummers and throughout the rehearsal process we had to learn to listen to the drums. It was very hard not to listen out for the equivalent of the base in *House* music and follow that drum; we had to follow, as Ajayi (1989: 5) states, "the rhythm pacer." When you managed to dance with the right drum and give the drum energy, the drummer would acknowledge this. The drummer would play harder and embrace and spur on your talents. An almost trance like state could be obtained as you would be so tired from a full day of dance training, but the music somewhat carried and supported your body through the release of expression. This could also be said going into London's Soho club, Madame Jojo's on a Sunday night when Jimbo (Groove Sanctuary) was playing his *House* set. Like the drummers, Jimbo's song selection would spur and encourage the dancers to "live" on the dance floor after a whole day of rehearsals in the studio. Even if you were physically tired, some how it felt

like Jimbo was playing just for you and you were refueled. The feeling of freedom of expression in an interactive community really does highlight the unity in *house* culture.

Musicality is also an aspect in *house dance* that defines the style and is briefly mentioned as a skill passed down from the dancers of the disco era to the *house* dancers. The importance of musicality is not just as a skill but also as embodiment of meaning. In Hazzard-Gordon's (1985: 429) examination of Afro-American social dances, four aspects are explored, identity, cultural integrity, ingroup-outgroup and political resistance. When discussing musicality in *house dance* a sense of identity and belonging (ingroup-outgroup) become apparent. Musicality is part of the foundation that makes a great *house* dancer. If a high standard of competence is achieved then one secures and enhances their membership in the group. It also focuses on the concept of identity being defined as the individual feeling that musicality is something they should be able to do in order to be a *house* dancer. The use of polyrhythms in social dances such as *house* makes musicality more complex than just duplicating rhythmical phrases in the music. Dixon-Gottschild (1996: 14) discusses Africanist movement and the utilisation of different centres of the body at the same time, polycentrism. When doing the train, a footwork step, the feet are doing a double tap rhythm (1&2&3&4&) whilst the upper body is keeping a steady 1,2,3,4 pace. The arms could be doing multiple rhythm changes, giving the body three different areas of tempo. It is complex to do, but the Africanist aesthetic of the cool is applied to make sure it looks easy.

House Old School Dictionary. (COSMOSUKR, 2010)

'Can You Feel It?': The Lure of *House*

If one has never experienced *house* dancing, one could, on first impression, believe that due to its high energy and the liberating vibe, anything goes. Victoria Igbokwe, Creative Director of UDC, reflects on her first encounter with *house dance*:

> I was actually at a club about two years ago in Oxford Circus and there were a few guys, I think they were from Korea, who were at the time doing house dance. I was just really intrigued by the fluidity and the flow but also the expression that they were just allowed to kinda portray. They had a bit of a circle and I jumped in because I thought yeah after five or ten minutes of watching them I knew what I was doing and I wish the ground opened up and swallowed me because I clearly knew nothing! (Igbokwe, 2009)

The main ethic of *house* is to provide a sense of freedom within a safe environment that allows the dancer to learn and explore. "The beat means safety…because everyone is moving in synchrony, it avoids disharmony, eschews collisions and fights" (Sommer, 2009: 286). Igbokwe also echoes this concept of the safety within *house dance* saying that it "is about exchange, it is about sharing and it is about supporting someone" (Igbokwe, 2009). This is important to the emerging culture of the dance itself especially as the new generation entering this dance form have been accustomed to the concept of battling "to gain their stripes" with an aggressive and arrogant approach which has been identified within the *b-boying* culture.

Dixon-Gottschild's theory on the Africanist aesthetic in European and American culture (1996: 11-19), and one of the principles, 'the Aesthetic of the Cool', is visible in *house dance*. Dancers perform the most complex of rhythms in their movements and exert a great deal of energy, however, the aim is to flow like water and make the movements look easy. This is an embodied aspect of African cultures that has been passed down through the history of social dance. The aim to promote being *cool* is used to display a high level of skill that other dancers will recognise. If an inexperienced spectator, like Igbokwe was in 2007, feels that the movements are something that they can replicate and in trying, realises there is much more than meets the eye, then the aim has been met.

Unlike Igbokwe, basic training was the first port of call from my peers. The fear of failure and 'dying' in *the circle* created an instinctive understanding of my limitations as a versatile dancer; one needs to know the basics. The concept of freestyling and training within a circle of

strangers, peers but, most importantly pioneers/elders, was the most gut-wrenching situation one could ever imagine. Practising the fundamentals had to be the first port of call. With peers alongside (including Igbokwe) reminiscing about their New York experience and their initiation into the *house dance* culture, my innate curiosity pushed me in *The Circle* at a dancers' night at club, Storm in Piccadilly Circus, London. I knew I would not get the authentic Chicago and New York experience that I craved, however, the anticipation of trying to get in the circle for the first time when one has connected to a beat and trying not to interrupt someone else's freestyle would have been the same worldwide. That build up of adrenaline and anxiety was immense. I managed to enter and I danced for my life; what I did fails me to this day! As a true novice trying to prove their worthiness I laid all my cards on the table at once and danced, disregarding the connection that primarily lured me into the circle. My freestyle lacked the musicality, grace and competence of my peers, but it allowed them to realise the newness of the dance form in my body.

> The combination of a circular space in a crowd, cleared for one couple to perform, with the emphasis on crowd participation and vocal encouragement, as well as the implication that *any* dancer might enter the circle (so long as they 'bring it'), illustrates not only the importance of individual contribution to communal dance discourse, but also the fine line between performer and audience in swing-dance culture". (Carroll, 2008:199-200)

When leaving *the circle*, a great sense of relief, euphoria, exhaustion and pride left with me. I actually had the courage to show my basic skills and certain *house* dancers gave me praise and feedback. I absolutely loved the experience and went into the circle several more times. Carroll's comments about swing-dance can undoubtedly be applied to *house dance* culture. Every dancer pulls from the same foundational source, but the variations that are offered to the *house dance* community adds to the rich development of the style. It is the mentality of exchange and the want to push boundaries of the self and the community that helps to evolve the movement not just in *house dance* but in all dance forms. I certainly pushed my boundaries that night and on reflection this was my rite of passage into *House* dance culture and the moment I got hooked on *house*.

From Club to Stage

Having identified the key areas that define *house dance*, how can the misappropriation of the style be avoided in choreographic works? How does

one take an ephemeral, improvisational dance style and transfer it to the stage? How does one keep alive the spontaneity of movement created in improvisation when setting choreography? The style relies on the influences of club culture to stimulate the process of individual expression, so what choreographic devices are used to shift the style to the stage without losing the elements that define it? The immediate loss of the surroundings and the rules of the club settings are apparent, but does this have an imposing effect on the form?

We listen to house music outside of the clubs but are still part of the scene. We "play" in dance studios, exchanging and cheering movements that are defined as *house dance*. *House dance* is versatile to its surroundings; it can be done outside the club, but why does it feel so much different in the clubs? The safe haven of the family orientated environment, set up by the elders, gives us a sense of safety within the darkness, the feeling of the music pulsing through the speakers into one's body, the anticipation of what set the DJ is going to play all participate in creating the *house* culture. If the intention, as a choreographer, is to transfer *house dance* to the stage, does one acknowledge these elements or does one just concentrate on the dance? Why is the transference important?

There are many dance groups that appropriate *house dance* culture and simply add it to their repertoire for aesthetic sake, in the bid to keep up with the "urban" dance scene and to showcase versatility. There are also *house* dancers forming groups and creating pure dance. Both are creating for the commercial dance world, for television programmes such as *Britain's Got Talent* and smaller dance showcases where, as the purpose of pure dance, it equips peoples' love to, "just dance and other peoples' love to just watch people just dancing" (Blom and Chaplin, 1989: 134) without any reference to cultural influences. There is nothing wrong with celebrating the aesthetics of house, but inevitably this process loses *house's* vibe, soul and urge of individualism. Conforming to the specifications of the commercial world stunts the growth of self-exploration as time restrictions and audience pleasing prevents many groups developing their choreographic processes. This type of choreography popularises dance forms but erases the dance's essence.

A large proportion of dancers, reference and access dance through *You Tube* and other social media sites where visual media can be uploaded. Economical and often geographical issues steer dancers and fans of dance to these sites. Dance classes can be very expensive and sometimes the styles students want to study are not available in their town or are poorly taught. Unfortunately, inaccurate technique alters the movements and can get so far removed from the original dance form it becomes something totally different but still categorised as the original form.

Websites like *You Tube* are a great way of archiving and sharing dance footage as a visual historical reference point but only if used correctly. Carroll (2008: 191) discusses the 'watch and repeat' syndrome that visual media sites allow. She states, and strengthens my earlier note, that formal pedagogic practice is the key to the development of dance knowledge and encourages the questioning of issues such as race and ethnicity along with the transmission of the cultural form.

The African cultural influences that have helped shape *house dance* and social dances such as, the communal rites of passage are lost when used simply as a tool for the entertainment industry. This could include websites that promote disconnections of sociality when interacting from behind a computer screen, talent programmes and showcases. "Social dancing is a central and fundamental carrier of meaning. The dance is imbued with individual, socio-psychological, cultural and political meaning" (Hazzard- Gordon, 1985: 441). When that is removed, you have a pile of steps without any substance. Those empty steps are used to promote the concept of 'urban dance' for dancers to emulate.

Vicki Igbokwe. (Photographer unknown, Date unknown)

Vicki Igbokwe, founder and artistic director of UDC, formed the company in January 2009. Her company's movement vocabulary is essentially a mix and blend of African, Contemporary and *House Dance* with other club styles such as *Waacking* and *Vogueing*. Igbokwe is in the process of creating her own technique, employing the fundamentals of the dance

styles to produce a movement vocabulary identifiable to UDC: "What I'm trying to do is really set an urban dance form in a contemporary [dance] back drop" (Igbokwe, 2009). She feels there is a need for social dance forms to develop their choreographic processes, encouraging and revisiting spatial exploration of these dances on stage. Returning to the social vernacular culture where movement exploration happens everywhere in space.

Igbokwe was born in Lagos, Nigeria but raised in London, England by her mother. Often in conversations about her childhood, Igbokwe would offer anecdotes of being asked to dance in front of her mothers' family guests. There would be no hesitation to dance, as this was part of growing up in an African household. Her efforts were rewarded with monetary gifts, often notes put on her forehead. The sweat from her endeavours would act as a glue to keep the money stuck there. Dancing was seen as something that could be done at anytime and the dancer was expected to perform when asked. Popular music from artist such as Michael Jackson or percussive beats was the accompaniment. The aspects and Africanist aesthetic of social dance in Igbokwe's household were not taught but passed down through the embodiment of her ancestors' history. The dances that she performed at an early age were a mix of popular culture such as the emulation of Michael Jackson's signature moves and movements that were passed down from her mother from the dances of Onitsha, Nigeria. Social dancing in the home was intrinsic to the shaping of Igbokwe's opinion of dance practice. "I have this thing and I say it to my dancers, where I like the music to wash over me. The music is my conductor; the music tells my body what it is I need to be doing" (Igbokwe, 2009).

As a dancer for UDC, the sense of the choreographic process being as important as the final performance is clearly apparent. Igbokwe's approach differs with each theatre piece she creates; she is very much inspired by music and a sense of musical envelopment aptly describes her visualisation of the music and the transference to the body. When listening to *house music* it cannot be done quietly, it has to resonate through the body, "it must be 'listened to' *with the body*" (Sommer, 2009: 295). Due to Igbokwe's training, her choreographic process is primarily influenced by a European dance framework; however, she has also trained as a street dancer and in club styles like *house*, *vogue*, and *waacking*. Consequently, this gives her the opportunity to take from both methods to influence her own. When asked whether *house dance* is a stimulus for her creative process, she responds quite firmly that she does not actively think that the dance is at the forefront of her process, but rather that house dance is within her vocabulary as are the other styles she works with: "I do

believe it is very important that I know the basics and fundamentals in terms of what makes house, house" (Igbokwe, 2009). Her strong belief to understand and master the fundamentals of each technique enables her to identify the similarities and differences. This allows for experimentation, thus working towards an innate mix and blend that is desired for UDC's movement vocabulary. Although Igbokwe may not see *house dance* as a major influence on her choreographic process, it is apparent that the culture and its ethics are definitely utilised.

From Club to Stage: Let the Kids Play

House dance is imbedded into Igbokwe's movement vocabulary and, like the majority of dancers she is attracted to certain movements more than others due to personal preference or ability. The jack, the farmer and footwork seem to be used often and are versatile to the themes Igbokwe explores. The jack, due to its thrusting motion has a lot of power that drives movement; it uses the whole body and can be varied in many ways, such as the jack-in-a-box; the jack is taken into second position and the main focus is on the torso moving either side to side, up and down and corner to corner whilst the legs are repeatedly pulsing outwards hitting the snare. Dependent on tempo and intention (choreographic direction), the outwards snap of the knees and the undulation of the back are quite suggestive of ideas of escapism, joy, anger, and frustration. Although the 'jack-in-a-box' can be quite static, it effectively leads into many different movements and gels well with different styles. Igbokwe, as one of the fundamentals in her vocabulary has employed the jack, so it is actively seen in her movement and gives her movement a noticeable internal metronome that engages the audience.

The music used in rehearsals is often mixes from DJs or records that Igbokwe really connects with, usually soulful or Afro *house*. The non-stop mix is played loud and the dancers are urged to connect with the music. The bass resonates and often participants refer to rehearsals as going to church. It is as if a sense of praise and community is being shared within the company. The music is an important element of the choreographic process as it serves as a springboard for ideas. The innate connection of music and dance is used when creating on the spot choreography. The rhythmical phrases serve, as sentences for the dancers to use as would be used in freestyling. Igbokwe sends rehearsal records to the composers and there is always a steady four to the floor beat in the soundtracks that are made. Igbokwe has mentioned the development of using a DJ within the rehearsal process and performances. This has also been a progression

in classes in London and New York. Live DJs are being used to bring the element of the club to the rehearsal and class settings.

The farmer is a repetitive elevated step; jumping from two feet to one and exchanging legs constantly. The elevation along with the sense of grounding can be associated with the Maasai Warrior *Adumu* dance. However, unlike the *Adumu* dance, in which dancers jump repetitively on the spot, the farmer has a marching like motion, which, applied with directional changes, lends itself quite well to traveling through space. The lack of understanding of grounding in newcomers to this step attracts the focus directly to the legs and this can give an aerobic class aesthetic where the use of the spine is void.

Footwork is used in all dance forms and can be the easiest element that can blend styles. A Jazz *pas-de-bourree* is different to a *house* version as the interaction with the floor and the polyrhythms differ. The body alignment alters the accents and the intention of the movement is more internal. As dancers are continually being trained in many styles, the crossovers are becoming ever more obvious. This gives so much scope for manipulation for choreographic purpose; but understanding the foundations of the style becomes ever more paramount if hybridity is to be explored. Igbokwe's use of footwork is quite complex; her footwork creates sequences with rhythmical and directional changes but all the while the sense of relevance is visible. Within her theatre work the dismissal of beautifully sculpted sequences that lack intention is understandable (this is not to say her work is not beautiful). A full immersion of the dancer in the intention of the piece is required at all times to enable the process of creation.

Igbokwe is very much inspired by her dancers and how their individual attributes affect their interpretation of her movements or themes. She sets a task and waits for the reply. She likens the process to call and response, similar to the relationship of the drummer and the dancer and the DJ and the dancer. This allows identity to be explored within the context of the piece and is integral to the development process. Igbokwe draws inspiration from the body's natural responses to the external and internal boundaries of the concept. She aims to tap into the dancers' abilities and vocabulary, "I may give my dancers tasks based on parts of the body or give them an emotion to work from or give them a small piece of choreography and get them to change the tempo and dynamics within this" (Igbokwe, 2009). The transcendent state that Welsh-Asante (2010: 16) discusses, could be applied to this process. Creating a choreographic method where dancers respond continuously and repeat pathways while maintaining technical competence and the ephebic, and allowing a greater authentic response.

Group Jump
(Photographer unknown, Date unknown)

Igbokwe uses improvisation in two ways; time limited improvisation that can be directly put onto stage or studio improvisation that is slightly set. Dancers are given the opportunity to "freestyle" (improvise) on stage with only a restraint on time. This is a trait that is seen in social dance showcases and allows the dancers to show their skills that are not in the choreographed movements. Freestyle sections are usually an opportunity for dancers to demonstrate *ephebism* (Dixon-Gottschild, 1996: 15-16). Flexibility, vitality, speed with quick and abrupt changes of dynamic are all elements of the *ephebism* principle. In a choreographed social dance format the dancer has to be part of the ensemble and freestyling is a way of showing the audience their individual power and drive. The movement can be misread as looking really hectic but the energy takes precedence over form in this principle.

Studio improvisation is teamed with choreographic devices to fortify certain momentary movements for the choreographers' vision. Dancers may be asked to hit a musical phrase within improvisational tasks or when rehearsing Igbokwe may see movements that may need to be repeated at specific points. This occasionally spills onto the stage, but there are boundaries that are enforced. At times, the essence of the original

delivery can be lost and the section has to be freshened up with slight tweaks. It is hard work making it look effortless knowing there are certain moments one needs to recreate. It is exactly the same as freestyling in a circle; one analyses the music whilst contemplating the next step one is going to execute to fit the rhythmical phrase coming up. The struggle is the constraint in the choreographed task that has to be constantly embodied.

"I think *house* affects my choreography to a certain degree mainly in the way I like my movement performed...House to me is edgy but graceful with great technique and this is what I look for in my work". (Igbokwe, 2009) Here Igbokwe describes her use of embracing conflict, "the Africanist aesthetic can be understood as a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites" (Dixon-Gottschild, 1996: 13). The lure of *house dance* is the conflict of the movement being performed as intense but calm also embraces the aesthetic of cool. The appeal of making sure that the difficult is made to look easy is always an aim in her work.

Igbokwe's preferred working method is to give dancers phrases, which they have to technically perfect before allowing them to "play" with the material, creating distinct personalities that fit the theme of the choreography. Even though she has an agenda for her rehearsals, almost a tick list of what she wants to achieve, Igbokwe does not use her dancers as, "puppets, *who are* there to execute her 'private imaginings'," (Carter, 1998: 19); rather, there is an openness allowing for the sharing and giving one sees in *house* culture and also the element of analysis: "It is very difficult to say where the creator and the interpreter take on and leave off" (Newman in Carter, 1998: 57).

Igbokwe is renowned for using themes to start her process of creation and she makes a point of informing her dancers of the theme and her thought processes. Journeys, fictional stories, frustration, and inner turmoil; anything that is relative to her at that moment is chosen to identify the mood of the piece and aid the movement choreography. According to her, "I think back to what the theme is in real life, how it lives, how it would walk, talk etc. I make notes, lots of notes" (Igbokwe, 2009). The theme is at the forefront of the company's mind when asked to "play", but at times the dancers cannot relate to the specific scenario that shaped the theme so the focus is shifted to the emotions that are generally attached to it. "In the first place you have to be in the material, whatever it is, whether you like it or not" (Preston-Dunlop, 1998: 59). Dancers are asked to think back to a time when they have been directly or indirectly affected by these emotions and this personalisation is used as a vehicle to drive the correct state of mind, desired by Igbokwe, for improvisation.

The clarity of personalised intention gives dancers the confidence to interpret and create movements.

Some may argue that the ephemeral or spontaneous element of "free-styling" is eliminated when it is put into a choreographic structure, however, when entering a club there is an element of pre-rehearsed movement vocabulary that is being used and also a well-informed musical knowledge that is relied on for the element of "play". The similarity between social and concert dances' preliminary preparatory stages are often overlooked by *house dance* purists as the overwhelming feeling of the end product being a "sell out" overrides their outlook. Successfully transferring *house* to the stage and creating a seamless blend with other styles is an aim for Igbokwe and it has become evermore apparent that her approach and processes are constantly evolving alongside the evermore evolving *house dance* and its use within the concert dance sector. Within Igbokwe's choreography she highlights the versatility of the dance form and the evolution that inevitably would have burst out of the club scene, as its growth has been inexorable.

Conclusions

The misappropriation of *house dance* in choreographic practice is the main concern of this article. The integration of *house dance* within choreographic practice could strip the style of certain elements that defined it; the technique, the club, community, music and the improvisational "play". I have shown in order for social dances such as *house dance* to gain true hybridisation with Western choreographic practice, the choreographer needs to fully understand the style and its culture. There also needs to be awareness that the exchange is not a way of making social dance sophisticated. Social dances have always been sophisticated dance forms when viewed using the right aesthetical frameworks. *House dance* technique has been explained through a lineage of music, giving some historical context and offering an insight into the influences of the style and how it was formed. The foundational elements of the dance form have been explained and explored by identifying how African culture has shaped the African-American dance form.

Monte Jones states that *house* is about, "Freeing yourself as a human. House is a feeling and a culture. It's not something you put on in the club and take off when you leave. House has its pulse, but it has to live in you" (Mirani, 2005). The use of the aesthetics and aspects that build and make up social dance culture are much more than the environment it is danced in. Social dance is a way of life and its practice is applied from the first moment of inception. I have highlighted how Igbokwe taps into her

preferred choice of aesthetics when choreographing for the stage and offer this as a guide for dancers who struggle with transferring the style to the stage. The influence of the Africanist aesthetic in her work is something to be unpacked in the studio and would offer insight to the methods that have been utilised without really understanding why. Through this process I raise the question of the importance of the Africanist aesthetic in pedagogic practice. There is a need for a greater understanding that social dance studies in the UK have to be read through an Africanist framework. This framework has to be increasingly accessible in pedagogic practice, especially in choreographic practice. The Africanist aesthetic is read and too often misread through the European gaze.

So can *house* dance be transferred to the proscenium arch stage? Using UDC as a case study, I have tried to show Igbokwe's process highlights that it is possible, but the context and expectations have to be clear. In order to gain an exchange and avoid appropriation of the culture's aesthetics, as Dixon-Gottschild (2003: 20) states, you have to fully immerse yourself in the culture. *House dance* technique is rapidly evolving within the dance world and has a versatile movement vocabulary. It has been affected by so many other styles and cultures and not only offers scope for artists to explore and develop, but creates a community in which finding your own personal groove is encouraged. The transference of *house dance* to the stage undoubtedly promotes the technique to a wider audience but also helps change perceptions of the sophistication of social dances with dance practice. However, first and foremost, the importance to wholly understand the dance, not only as steps but also as a culture is the key to positively and effectively transferring the dance style onto the stage.

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