
Building Enduring Partnerships In Research and Performance: The First Decade of the Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium (TACAC)

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21st century African experimental choreographers have not only constructed dances, but also spaces of freedom. As they embody new forms of expression, forerunners imagine new communities and stimulate public discourse. Often confronting and challenging dominant norms, the creative practices of such artist-citizens are also practices of democracy building. Inspired by their work, the UF Center for World Arts celebrates the tenth anniversary of co-founding of the Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium (TACAC), an organization formed to support the work of contemporary artists in and of Africa.

Creative processes and products amass energy and resilience, building potential to alter critical perceptions and material realities. A new generation of choreographers has mastered such artistic alchemy. Faustin Linyekula (DRC), Opiyo Okach (Kenya), Nelisiwe Xaba (South Africa), Nadia Beugré (Cote d'Ivoire), among others, have transformed political histories, social tensions, governmental disruptions, and more, into intimate spaces for analysis and reflection. Such intricately mediated environments foster possibilities for “thinking differently.” If, during the decades since independence, dance performance was primarily positioned to play the role of cultural progenitor, this dance form has taken on the role of cultural interrogator, if not iconoclast.

From 1999 to the present, I have

been fortunate to work with outstanding choreographers, including Béatrice Kombé (1971-2007). Resolving early on to engage with international audiences, artists showcased their creativity in uneven associations with European presenters. If initially positioned in the “global arts” market, a number of artists emerged as leading contemporary dance figures. While building European audiences, artists also sought to develop audiences for their work at home, seeking to professionalize and sustain their craft at the grassroots level.

By 2004, Americans remained largely unaware of contemporary dance from Africa. To address the gap, in concert with the Center for African Studies, the UF Center for World Arts created the Gwendolen M. Carter conference/festival Movement (R)Evolution Dialogues: Contemporary Performance in and of Africa. Prominent participants introduced the form to American artists, scholars, critics, and students in several days of lectures, symposia, and choreographic laboratories. Moreover, as the artists debated best practices to foster and sustain contemporary dancemaking in Africa, they came to understand the unique circumstances of their fellow African artists. Preparing for the Gwendolen M. Carter conference/festival was followed by a special invitation from MAPP International Productions to collaborate with top tier American arts organizations; and in 2004, the UF Center for World Arts co-founded The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium.

Today, ten U.S. organizations and ten African affiliates comprise TACAC. Our activities cycle to amass energy and resilience among partners, affiliates, and the varied constituencies we serve. In contrast to many “cultural exchanges,” TACAC projects pursue mutually beneficial interactions defined by those involved. In a decade of operation, TACAC has prioritized people

over “cultures.” Our evolving friendships and artist-networks thrive as we engage with cultural workers, organizations, and public communities across Africa and the U.S. We embrace human creativity as an invaluable resource. However fleeting, fragile, or intangible it may seem, human creativity is, in fact, a resilient, renewable, and eminently sustainable resource...particularly in a diverse and relational ecosystem such as TACAC.

Joan Frosch professor of theater & dance, director of the Center for World Arts, and founding member of TACAC. TACAC is supported by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and in-kind contributions of member institutions. Individual touring and residency projects have received support from l'Institut Français, and from the National Dance Project of the New England Foundation for the Arts (with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and additional funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Community Connections Fund of the MetLife Foundation, and the Boeing Company Charitable Trust). Support for the participation of African artists in TACAC programs has been made possible by the Lambent Foundation, the eeg-cowles Foundation, and Art Moves Africa. Leadership support for research, planning, and contextualization provided by the National Endowment for the Arts (2006-2012).