

# The State Theatre Dance Company and the shaping of contemporary dance in South Africa

LIZÉ KRIEL

The history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing.  
*Edward Said*

## Introduction

Since the last half of the 1980's, new tendencies in dance theatre resulted in the foundation of a number of contemporary dance companies, and in the organising of annual gatherings where the sum total of South African dance variations can be exhibited and judged. During these annual gatherings, the presentations had an unmistakably local character. They were nevertheless an adaptation of tendencies elsewhere in the Western world. So-called *avant-garde* and modern dance were already established in the USA and Europe in the forties – post-modern dance by the sixties. On Western choreography at the end of the nineteenth century, Joan Cass remarks:

Separating dance styles with labels like “ballet”, “modern dance”, “modern ballet”, and “avant-garde” was useful in dealing with the past. This is no longer necessary. In the

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\* Lizé Kriel is Lecturer in the Department of History and Cultural History at the University of Pretoria. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Second Bilateral Conference of Dutch and South African Historians, Wassenaar, 6-8 July 2000. The author is grateful to Esther Nasser, Rosa Vasco and Therese Davis, formerly of the State Theatre, for comments and help with obtaining newspaper clippings.

present, all styles are intermingled, not only in one company's repertory, but within a single choreographic work.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, contemporary, modern, and post-modern dance in South Africa was distinguished from "classical ballet" so strongly, that the two "genres" were even accommodated in separate companies.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in her history of dance, Cass explains this tendency:

From its early beginnings, and through all its changes down to the present, modern dance has embodied the idea that one becomes a modern dancer (rather than a ballet dancer) to create compositions, rather than to interpret the choreography of others.<sup>3</sup>

Against the backdrop of classical repertoires of the ballet dancers, the post-modern dance definition of American dance historian Sally Banes seems to be a good version of that which contemporary companies had striven for in the numerous new works choreographed locally. She explains:

Postmodern dance has changed in many ways over the last thirty years... Once a predominantly Euro-American avant-garde movement, by the nineties postmodern dance has become multicultural in every sense. It is multi-ethnic; it advocates diversity of gender, sexual choice, age, and physical ability; and it includes within its vocabulary every available genre of dance, gleaned from the entire hierarchy of cultural levels. Further, it restores the speaking voice to the dancer's body. And it is a historically conscious movement that reproduces, recycles, and renews dances from different eras.<sup>4</sup>

According to this definition, post-modern dance seems to be the cultural expression *par excellence* for South Africa of the nineties. Contemporary dance of the past decade was multicultural and indigenous; politically conscious, provocative, and popular. Already in 1992, Dr. Fred Hagemann, chairman of the Dance Alliance, justified the role of contemporary dance in South Africa when he stated:

Dance is not a luxury... It is part of each person's physical,

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1. J. CASS, *Dancing through history* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1993), p. 367.
  2. C. CANAVAN, Dance: the best of 1993, *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1994.01.11
  3. J. CASS, *Dancing through history* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1993), p. 222.
  4. S. BANES, *Writing dancing in the age of post-modernism* (Hanover, New England, 1994), p. xiv.

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emotional, intellectual and cultural growth. It is a language [a universal language<sup>5</sup>, according to Esther Nasser] through which we can share each other's pain and accomplishments.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the local choreography expressed this view over the past ten years. There was *Me* by Christopher Kindo, which later became *Me and you*<sup>7</sup> (a celebration of individualism in the realisation of an own identity by the fusion of Oriental, Western, and African traditions, "drawing on my own personal experience and a variety of South African influences").<sup>8</sup> (See *Figure 1*.)



**Figure 1 Luana Nasser in the 1994 performance of Christopher Kindo's *Me and you*. Photograph: Edzard Meyberg**

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5. L. FURTER.AUCAMP, "Geselskap se unieke stemming eie aan Suid.Afrika," *Metro Applous*, 1996.05.17.
  6. M. JENKINS, "Debate on Dance" in *The Citizen*, 1992.08.12.
  7. A. SICHEL, "Now Kindo's career is set for free flight" in *The Star Tonight*, 1992.30.11.
  8. ANON., "Innovative dance for Wits Umbrella" in *The Star Tonight*, 1992.02.10.

*Historia*, 46(1), May 2001, pp. 159-88.



**Figure 2 Gladys Agulhas of the PDC dancing Christopher Kindo's *Me and You* with Standard Four pupil Mbali Tsoai during the Company's visit to Mayfair Convent in May 1995. Photograph: Edzard Meyberg**

This work by Kindo was later used successfully in the schools tour that

formed part of PACT<sup>9</sup> Dance Company / the PDC's "Dance in the Community Project." (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> The youth, especially from previously disadvantaged communities, were introduced to contemporary dance in large numbers. At the 1992 *Dance Umbrella*, a yearly gathering of dancers from all over South Africa, dance critic Adrienne Sichel was impressed by Brenda and Peter Peterson's youth group from the Bloemfontein Townships. She noted:

It was startling, not to say disconcerting, to be confronted by a boy in full traditional dress, in a graceful arabesque, miming playing a flute. The African Pan (*via* Nijinsky) turns out to be playing a penny whistle a la Mango Groove in tribute to Spokes Mashiyane.<sup>11</sup>

South African choreography addressed social questions out of every layer of society. There are many examples. Boyzie Cekwana's winning choreography for the 1995 Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year Award, *Kude Nomfula* (Far from the River) introduces the traditional forefather spirits into the world of contemporary violence-weary South Africa. An *imbongi*, storyteller and spiritual medium, brings to the people/audience a reprimand from the spirits, made visible by dancers who simultaneously descend from the sky.<sup>12</sup> A river is presented as metaphorical source of life and as a guideline for harmony, and leaves the audience with the following realisation: "The river is the centre of life and life never strays far from it. We have."<sup>13</sup> In the following year, with *Juliet and Romeo* (Figure 3), Esther Nasser transferred Shakespeare's age-old love-saga to Johannesburg of the nineties: rave, ecstasy, school alcoholism, a bored, indolent, white Juliet [Candice Johnstone], a black Romeo [Melody Putu], anxious to renounce the township and to climb the social ladder. There was also Thibault a closet homosexual.<sup>14</sup> Also in 1996, Jackie Semela's Soweto Dance Company performed *Tlhaselo*, with township dancers portraying Afrikaner suffering in Anglo-Boer War concentration camps. Mandla Mcunu's *That*

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9. Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal.

10. A. SICHEL, "Rhythm action at work and school" in *The Star Tonight*, 1995.05.17.

11. A. SICHEL, "Dancing which both implodes and explodes" in *The Star Tonight*, 1992.03.13.

12. D. KANDLOVU, "Cekwana dances the river, the gods, the heartbeat" in *Cue 9* (8) 1995.07.13.

13. The Grahamstown Foundation, *Standard bank National Arts Festival 1995 programme* (Grahamstown, 1995), p. 42.

14. T. ODENDAAL, "'Romeo & Juliet' op sy kop gedraai" in *Beeld*, 1996.07.03.

*Day* from the same year, brought grieving much nearer to the present and to the individual, with a requiem danced for the death of his mother.<sup>15</sup> In his commentary on the first performance of his work, in which he cast white Candice Johnstone in the role of his mother, he strikingly summarised the ability of dance to challenge not only gender,



**Figure 3 Charene Griggs and Anton van Niekerk cast in the 1996 performance of Esther Nasser’s *Juliet and Romeo*. Griggs and Van Niekerk alternated with Candice Johnstone and Melody Putu in the roles of the loving couple. Critics were particularly impressed with the performance by Griggs. Photograph: Edzard Meyberg**

but also racial stereotypes: “I see a dancer, not a white person.”<sup>16</sup> Raw emotional social commentary probably reached its apex in Jeanette Ginslov’s *written in blood* (1998), performed by dancers of the PDC – renamed the State Theatre Dance Company (STDC) in 1997. This award-winning piece of choreography comments on the brutal murder on a white farm family. The continuous social comment of contemporary dance in the midst of ever-changing focal points becomes apparent when Ginslov’s *written in blood* is compared with her *Sandstone* of ten years previously. In 1988, using the voice of the then State President, P.W.

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15. H. MACKIE, “Cross.cultural dancing tackles plight of the Boers” in *Business Day*, 1996.10.16.

16. A. SICHEL, “Dancing on apartheid’s grave” in *The Star*, 1999.10.18.

Botha and semi-naked dancers, was enough to get her into hot water.<sup>17</sup>

Local choreography was no success story of consecutive highlights, however. By 1994, the excited pronouncements of critics on ethnical variety and local resourcefulness began drying up. Instead, at the end of the decade, it became obvious that South African contemporary dance had received much of its vitality from foreign, partly American, partly European, inputs. In spite of the excitement of critics about local talent, during this decade Western “multiculturalism” became the ironic resource for “local fusion”. Even post-modern dancers could not survive only on good reviews. A way had to be found to establish a South African audience for contemporary dance – and “imported products” proved to be the more successful bait.

The focus of this article is contemporary dance theatre in South Africa, specifically the reception thereof by South African audiences and critics during the last decade of the twentieth century. I argue that the vitality of this art form in South Africa is directly related to what happens in the global dance world and that it is therefore dependent on American and European inputs. On the one hand it is concerned with artistic inspiration from works of foreign choreographers, and on the other hand the development of local dancers (dance technique and dance discipline). I also argue that the multicultural nature of post-modern dance should not be sought in the art *form* as such. Performance on stage requires knowledge of the Western dance traditions and conforming to several very much ‘Western’ theatre conventions such as repetitions, ticket sales, sound and lighting, rigorous disciplining of the bodies of the dancers. In *content*, though, contemporary dance is indeed quite multicultural, hybrid and flexible. Craig Canavan referred to it as “tak[ing] ethnic influences and fit[ting] them into a theatrical context.”<sup>18</sup> This is also apparent from the fact that even the various American and European choreographers whose works have been performed in South Africa, cannot necessarily be described as having had a ‘typically American’ or ‘typically Dutch’ training or style, but rather as having absorbed influences from all over. This is further confirmed by the way in which talented local dancer-choreographers were inspired and coached in turn by European tradition. In this way the choreography of celebrated

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17. A. SICHEL, “Carving identity” in *The Star*, 1998.12.08.

18. C. CANAVAN, “PACT takes honours as best company” in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1994.11.01.

dancers Christopher Kindo and Boyzie Cekwana is based on a self-confessed classical basis<sup>19</sup> – with the masterly utilization of Indian and African style to the boot!<sup>20</sup> Perhaps even more important than the ‘globalisation’ of dance styles, is the universal appeal of the themes of the works from overseas choreographers that were performed in South Africa.

While it cannot be said as easily about themes and styles, on organisational and financial level, support and contributions can be traced back to specific foreign institutions. During the founding years of the PDC, the personal enthusiasm of Dr. Rosemary Crockett, cultural attaché at the American Embassy, meant an international lifeline for this company.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch Embassy has been sponsoring the community outreach project of the PDC ever since.<sup>22</sup> Foreign aid in the form of sponsorships and workshops for dance development is a subject on its own. This article will focus upon the part played by foreign choreographers in the growth and popularity of the PACT Dance Company. Since its establishment in 1988, this most outstanding dance company in South Africa moved back and forth between Pretoria and Johannesburg until it was renamed the State Theatre Dance Company (STDC) and relocated in Pretoria in 1997. It will be indicated how the PDC/STDC assumed the lead in establishing contemporary dance as a South African art form during the nineties, by using foreign crutches to build a local support base, and by starting to exchange these crutches for a fruitful partnership between local and overseas choreographers.

## Reception History

During the nineties, South African dance critics moved from initial admiration of local variety and social-conscious choreography, through sobering criticism of bad quality and predictability, to a feeling, at the end of the decade, that foreign choreography was an inseparable part of the South African repertoire. Marilyn Jenkins of *The Citizen* summed up

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19. R. GREEN, “Breaking the shackles is Christopher Kindo” in *Pretoria News*, 1992.02.06.

20. M. BEUKES, “Truk.dans verdien meer as klein gehoor” in *Beeld*, 1993.10.12; M. JENKINS, “Enigma, elegiac despair” in *The Citizen*, 1993.10.12; M. JENKINS, “Spirit and invention” in *The Citizen*, 1994.05.09.

21. A. SICHEL, “Making a diplomatic difference” in *The Star*, 1996.08.13.

22. M. JENKINS, “Dutch chance for young dancers” in *The Citizen*, 1996.11.15.



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the 1991 dance year with her heading “Reflecting political violence”<sup>23</sup>  
About the 1992 *Dance Umbrella*, Adrienne Sichel wrote:

They don't need to go to a ballot box on Tuesday to vote 'Yes' [she was referring to the last 'white' referendum]. Their aspirations for a multi-cultural society which respects and explores diversity and individuality is clearly reflected in the works and by the mix of participants.<sup>24</sup>

Jenkins on the 1992 *Dance Umbrella* states:

More than 60 choreographers staged works, which showed considerable progress along the road towards definitive South African dance forms. There were gumboots, toe-shoes, drums and saxophones, castanets and rap, and highly individual exploration of every kind of dance from jazz to traditional African.<sup>25</sup>

In his review of 1993, Craig Canavan gets peevish about quality, but does concede that 'sheer exuberance and power' can compensate for a shortage of technical correctness.<sup>26</sup>

What made the greatest impression on Canavan during 1993, was the policy of the Head of the PDC, Esther Nasser,<sup>27</sup> to combine local productions with the best works she could find overseas. Not only did it result in the PDC being indicated in that year for the first time as the best South African contemporary dance company, but this work method was also used as an example of how contemporary dance would be able to establish an audience of meaningful size. In an in-depth article in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian* earlier that year, Stanley Peskin already described the problem:

To be repeatedly told that the bringing together of African and contemporary styles is in itself a remarkable breakthrough cannot persuade an audience that what it is seeing is not self-

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23. M. JENKINS, “Reflecting political violence” in *The Citizen*, 1992.01.13.

24. A. SICHEL, “Dancing which both implodes and explodes” in *The Star Tonight*, 1992.03.13.

25. M. JENKINS, “Dynamism of local dance forms” in *The Citizen*, 1993.01.14.

26. C. CANAVAN, “PACT takes honours as best company” in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1994.01.11.

27. Esther Nasser became Dance Mistress for the Company in 1988; she was appointed Artistic Manager in 1989; in 1992 she became Head of the Company and in 1994 she was promoted to Artistic Director.

indulgent, tired and repetitive.<sup>28</sup>

By providing a chance for the PDC dancers to interpret and perform in the moving *Death and the maiden*, with which American Robert North has had much success overseas, ‘the company has given us something to look at, to admire, and to enjoy.’<sup>29</sup>

When, at the end of the politically euphoric 1994, Canavan snorted that ‘quality had seemingly become a dirty word’<sup>30</sup>, the fragile relationship between contemporary choreography and the dance expectations of South African audiences was confirmed once more. Quoting Peskin from the year before:

Nor is it enough to be told that the public should alter its expectations. An accommodation to new forms of expression would be possible if local choreographers were less derivative, and if dancers’ bodies were better toned and disciplined – there is little to suggest that there is an adequate training in either contemporary or classical dance.<sup>31</sup>

The expectations about ‘quality’, and the near-obvious contradiction/juxtapositioning with ballet underlying the comment of dance experts on contemporary dance throughout the nineties, reveals the strong Western (mainly white) cultural framework of the average South African theatregoer. Esther Nasser herself strikingly typified South Africa’s ‘small theatre population’ by contrasting its coming into being with developments in Europe. She explained:

Ballet het in 1964 professioneel hier afgeskop toe daar ‘n ontploffing van moderne dans oorsee was. Dáár was moderne dans toe al dekades lank gevestig. In die jare sewentig was daar fenomenale groei in moderne dans in Amerika en Europa. Die fenomeen het veral byval by studente gevind. Hulle is vandag ‘n bestendige volwasse gehoor wat moderne dans ondersteun. Oorsee is moderne dans ‘n tradisie. Ons bly gedurig agter. Oorsee is die gehore verkennend. Ons was tot dusver baie

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28. S. PESKIN, “Contemporary dance: the real Cinderella” in *The Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1993.10.29 - 1993.11.04, p. 44.

29. S. PESKIN, “Contemporary dance: the real Cinderella” in *The Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1993.10.29 - 1993.11.04, p. 44.

30. C. CANAVAN, “Too much to carp about on the dance floor” in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1995.01.05.

31. S. PESKIN, “Contemporary dance: the real Cinderella” in *The Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1993.10.29 - 1993.11.04, p.44.

geïsoleerd en konserwatief.<sup>32</sup>

The socially-conscious, equalising tendencies of modern and post-modern dance did not accidentally hit South Africa simultaneously with greater political freedom and artistic broad-mindedness representative of the De Klerk/Mandela-era. The same tendencies which challenged the existing theatre population, the most probable support base of contemporary dance, was supposed to simultaneously create the potential for broadening the support base by making dance theatre accessible to all population groups. The supposition was that the dance audience would become as multicultural as the *troupe* on stage and the type of themes that promoted the interests of the masses would entice the masses. Against such expectations, the masses, which knew no 'high' theatre culture, did not stream to performances intended to be of interest to them. Simultaneously the established theatregoers did not take to the new tendencies *en masse*, either, because what they saw on stage no longer met their expectations.

Contemporary dance exacts a re-thinking about the way in which the body is utilised in the dance, about the roles allocated to male and female dancers, about the themes portrayed. On the one hand challenging the conventions of classical ballet, it still needs to appeal to an audience on the other hand. It expects the audience to be aware that non-conventions are being presented to them – and that they will need new 'equipment' (with a strongly-supposed knowledge base of the old equipment) in order to interpret it. Contemporary choreographers not only want to satisfy the perceptions and ideological – even aesthetic – expectations of their audiences. They rather want to provoke, disillusion, move to new insight, possibly even to make modern man smile at himself. This apparently led to some creators in the new medium forgetting that contemporary dance would expect *more* rather than less from audiences, and therefore would impose strict demands on dancers, although not necessarily similar to classical ballet. The new dance theatre was already experimental; unpolished, undisciplined players were

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32. S. SCHOOMBIE, "Susters in die dans" in *De Kat*, June 1993, p. 91. "In 1964, ballet took root here professionally at a time when there was an explosion in modern dance overseas. There, modern dance had been established for decades. During the seventies, there was a phenomenal growth in modern dance in America and Europe. This phenomenon became popular especially among students. Today, these people form a regular adult audience who support modern dance. Modern dance is a tradition overseas. We always seem to lag behind. Audiences overseas are explorative. To date, we have been very isolated and conservative." (Translation Henry Pinkham).

unable to buy the patience of audiences to sit through their ‘falling around’. It was necessary, therefore, to work on both sides. As to audiences: new had to be created – or existing ones had to be moved gradually in order to change their horizons of expectation. Concerning dancers: choreographers and dance masters had to literally make them ‘spectacular’, in as far as the concept ‘spectacular’ could transcend cultural boundaries. Only if the latter were true, would audiences continue to turn up and be receptive to being ‘moved’ in any way. Successful works of foreign choreographers, being of technically high quality and thematically boasting universal appeal, was an extremely suitable medium by which one could reach for this goal.

The success obtained by the PDC with this approach in 1994 and 1995, is reflected in the reviews, awards, and support received during this period. Not only did PDC dancers Melody Putu and Alethea Knight win the Vita prizes for the best male and female dancers,<sup>33</sup> but with the consensus of several critics,<sup>34</sup> the company established itself for the rest of the decade, as the best contemporary company in South Africa. During 1994 they improved their technical finish under the guidance of Israeli dance mistress Shelly Sheer, and displayed it best during re-performances of works by foreign choreographers – notably Shapiro’s *Family*, Eliza Monte’s *Dreamtime*, and Ed Wubbe’s *Schlager*.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas in 1994, the PDC’s own choreography did not compare favourably with these already proven works, critics raved about the local element in the PDC programmes during the next year. From Canavan’s comments, it is obvious that exposure to foreign choreography in the previous years had left an impression on local performances, as far as both quality and creativity, and consequently spectacularity, were concerned:

The choreography, most of it local, was of an extremely high standard, the dancers seem to improve (if it is possible to improve on such excellence) with each passing minute, and they

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33. A. SICHEL, “PDC dancers scoop top awards” in *The Star Tonight*, 1994.03.14.

34. M. JENKINS, “Plethora of dance nouveau” in *The Citizen*, 1995.01.17; C. CANAVAN, “Some highs, some lows in dance” in *Pretoria News Interval*, 1996.01.05.

35. C. CANAVAN, “Too much to carp about on the floor” in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1995.01.05.

even managed to get a few of the technical aspects right.<sup>36</sup>

About PDC choreographer Candice Johnstone's *In this heart*, performed by the students of the Pretoria Technikon, Canavan writes: "... brilliant, certainly the best piece of contemporary choreography I've ever seen in this country."<sup>37</sup> The atmosphere in the capacity packed Breytenbach Theatre in Pretoria could probably not be described in less emotional terms than 'electric'. According to Canavan:

(I)t was truly unforgettable, indescribably moving, and professional companies, including the snobbish ballet companies, should have been falling over themselves in an effort to buy it.<sup>38</sup>

The reference to the ballet companies proves that contemporary dance had, to a great extent, arrived since Stanley Peskin speculated in the *Mail & Guardian* two years before as to whether or not the South African ballet audience was ready for a new approach.<sup>39</sup> Since then, the PDC has obviously developed into a direction in which their shows would be receivable. How many new converts were recruited as dedicated theatregoers, is another question. Creating 'new audiences' apparently is a much more cumbersome process than the expansion/rerouting of an existing support base.

The year 1995 undoubtedly was a high-water mark for the PDC, and although they continued to build on this quality base in subsequent years, it would be unrealistic to expect the company to repeat the stir created during 1995, on a yearly basis. In fact, the visit of the *Nederlands Dans Teater 3* predominated in Canavan's criticism of the 1996 dance year.<sup>40</sup> NDT3's visit practically introduced a new phase of international competition in this country for the PDC – and other South African dance companies – by the second half of the decade. In this time, both NDT2 and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company came to perform in South Africa – undoubtedly representative of the best contemporary dance on both sides of the Atlantic.

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36. C. CANAVAN, "Some highs, some lows in dance" in *Pretoria News Interval*, 1996.01.05.

37. C. CANAVAN, "Some highs, some lows in dance" in *Pretoria News Interval*, 1996.01.05.

38. C. CANAVAN, "Some highs, some lows in dance" in *Pretoria News Interval*, 1996.01.05.

39. S. PESKIN, "Contemporary Dance: the real Cinderella" in *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1993.10.29 - 1993.11.04, p. 44.

40. C. CANAVAN, "Nothing out of the ordinary" in *Pretoria News*, 1997.01.02.

It is understandable, therefore, that, at the end of the decade, dance critic Schalk Schoombie did not, in his articles in *Beeld*, allow choreographers to become smug or contented.<sup>41</sup> He compared their creations with the growing international offer which gave greater publicity to contemporary dance and also established new standards and certain expectations with local audiences. For Schoombie local dance creators were still 'stepping too lightly'. Moreover they were superficial and without daring. His criticism may have been an indication that the PDC/STDC was at the crossroads as far as choreography was concerned. It could also have stressed the need to become retrospective and subsequently find inspiration and create works for the new century. The European works they performed up to the end of 1999, were complex, intelligent, and technically challenging. The outstanding quality of the interpretations of these works confirms there was no shortage of latent energy among company members by the end of the nineties. It was therefore anticipated that in the new decade, they would be able to produce new creations, which would draw from local inspiration. At the same time it had to have universal appeal, as was the case with the European creations.

Nasser had already put this ideal into words for the PDC in 1995. The question was what would pass as 'local inspiration'. Boyzie Cekwana's first place in the 1999 Sanga Festival of African and Indian Ocean Choreography was soured by the criticism by other participants from Africa who claimed that South Africa's easy access to European and American influences had curried favour with the European judges. It was thought that this state of affairs had alienated the South Africans from an own set of criteria for African contemporary dance.<sup>42</sup> Nasser was probably right when she predicted that the definition of South African and African identities in contemporary dance 'may make us confused for a while'.<sup>43</sup> The other question was whether this ideal, in the South African theatre context, would satisfy only dance critics and reviewers, and whether it would succeed in drawing full houses. In spite of the fact that the works of some of the visiting American choreographers proved to be of disappointing quality,<sup>44</sup> the addition of a foreign name to a local

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41. S. SCHOOMBIE, "Dans in Suid.Afrika kan veel by buitelanders leer" in *Beeld*, 1998.01.14; S. SCHOOMBIE, "Europese dansinsette inspirerend" in *Beeld*, 1999.12.20.

42. J. MATSHIKIZA, "SA groups dance into controversy" in *Mail & Guardian*, 1999.11.19 – 1999.11.25, p. 4.

43. A. SICHEL, "Dancers must go step further" in *The Pretoria News*, 1995.08.25.

44. C. CANAVAN, "Too much to carp about on the floor" in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1995.01.05.

dance programme did seem to boost ticket sales throughout the 1990s.

Influence from abroad could of course not be the only reason for the popularity of the STDC during the 1990s. There were other factors, such as state subsidies, good facilities and their locality in the densely populated and entertainment-hungry Gauteng. There was also the excellent source of recruits at the Dance Department of Technikon Pretoria. Despite strong international competition, the PDC/STDC at no time had sole rights to the grooming of dancers/choreographers. Brilliant Boyzie Cekwana was attached to the PDC for a short time only, and received his initial training neither at the then PDC, nor at Technikon Pretoria, but rather from Soweto dance master Carly Dibakoane and the Johannesburg Dance Foundation.<sup>45</sup> That the relationship between the PDC/STDC and companies abroad did however play an exceptionally meaningful role in the growth of this company into the most respected one in South Africa, is an undeniable fact. The impressive group of choreographers whose spectacular works were introduced to South Africans by the efforts of Esther Nasser, was an affirmation that the interaction between local and overseas talent was an important ingredient of the STDC success story.

### **International choreographers and their work: Artistic inspiration**

The question comes to mind: What happened behind the scenes in the State Theatre Dance Company in the 1990's? How did Esther Nasser succeed in drawing the attention of celebrated European and American choreographers onto South Africa? What was the political climate prevailing when she enlisted foreign aid? What was the nature and themes of foreign works performed here? How did these relate to local conditions, and how did it influence local choreography?

In order to orientate oneself to these questions, it is necessary to take note of the first years of the PDC. While the PACT Ballet Company remained independent, the PACT Dance Company was established in 1988 as South Africa's first professional contemporary dance company.<sup>46</sup> Considering its legitimacy as one of *the* companies representing South

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45. The Grahamstown Foundation, *Standard Bank National Arts Festival 1995 programme* (Grahamstown, 1995), p. 35.

46. A. COETZEE, "Pact modern dance company set for debut" in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1988.02.02.

African talent by the end of the 1990s, the controversial political milieu in which the Company was conceived back in the 1980s, is significant. Adrienne Sichel wanted to know what the company was doing based in Pretoria, while “the driving force of contemporary dance [was] in Johannesburg and on the Reef”<sup>47</sup>. The answer was fairly obvious: the Company operated under the umbrella of the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal; its dancers were, as a matter of fact, employees of the National Party Government which, back in 1988 under the presidency of P.W. Botha, was still representative of what is today considered by many as an unpopular old order. Fred Hagemann stated it bluntly:

The first contemporary dance company has been created by the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal in which a few black dancers, trained in the western mode, have been given positions. This gesture by the State is not seen as an act of enlightenment by the Mass Democratic Movement but as a means of co-opting performers in order to counteract the cultural boycott.<sup>48</sup>

Hagemann’s assessment vividly summarises the predicament of South African artists in the volatile 1980s: a climate in which all performance could be perceived as a political statement – and where those consciously dissociating themselves from political comment could be judged for, in that very act, actually having taken a ‘pro-Apartheid’ stance.

While reflecting the attitudes and impressions of the Mass Democratic Movement, Hagemann does, however, perhaps also overestimate the ability of the authorities to have controlled the form and dictated the content of the performing arts they sponsored. A government-sponsored platform could also be used as a ‘Trojan Horse’ to launch social comment and political criticism of the cleverest kind into the centre of the art-loving white community. Moreover, as a representative of the African American community, Dr Rosemary Crockett of the United

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47. A. SICHEL, “Dance company must spread its wings” in *The Star Tonight*, 1989.02.02.

48. F. HAGEMANN, “The politics of dance in South Africa” in *Ballet International I*, 1990, p. 146.



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States Embassy would hardly have continued her support for the PDC until the end of her term in South Africa unless she was comfortable with the direction into which the Company was growing. Sichel's criticism of the PDC's artistic 'exile' in Pretoria, while the "driving force" of contemporary dance was in Johannesburg, was justified indeed, but by reaching out to schools in Mamelodi, Laudium and Atteridgeville,<sup>49</sup> the PDC, and later also the STDC (with the already mentioned Dutch aid) contributed to spreading an interest in contemporary dance to Pretoria and surroundings, rather than monopolising it for Johannesburg.

The readiness of independent dance companies, such as Johannesburg's Free Flight Dance Company and Cape Town's Jazzart, to compete with the PDC for awards and talented dancers and the relative ease with which dancers oscillated between the professional (government) and the freelance (independent) companies ever since the PDC's early years, put another question mark behind Hagemann's stance: In 1990, Christopher Kindo, founder member of the PDC, was awarded the AA Life Vita Award for the best male dancer of the year. This was hardly the performance of a co-opted 'token-black', and Kindo would have been offended for being branded as performing in "the western mode". While Kindo left the PDC to accept the post of Assistant Artistic Director at Free Flight in 1992, three other dancers left Free Flight to join the PDC during the same year. Kelsey Middleton was returning to the company of which she, too, was a founder member. The other two newcomers, Mandla Mcunu and Boyzie Cekwana, both products of the Johannesburg Dance Foundation,<sup>50</sup> would develop into two of the most sparkling acquisitions in the South African dance world.

The road of political transition embarked upon by South Africa after F.W. de Klerk's unbanning of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, also resulted in the opening up of international contacts for South African artists after years of isolation. The turbulent transition to democracy was reflected in developments in the arts world. In 1992 the PDC was performing in the midst of demonstrations by members of the recently unbanned ANC.<sup>51</sup> In order to soften the white image of the performing arts, the City Council of

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49. ANON., *Pact Ballet News I*, 1989.02.18.

50. ANON., "Changes in dance companies" in *The Citizen*, 1992.01.03.

51. M. BEUKES, "Nie heeltemal bevredigend" in *Beeld*, 1992.08.11.

Johannesburg, the American Intelligence Service and Nedbank together spent R3million to have the Afro-American Harlem Dance Company to perform at the opening of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre.<sup>52</sup> During the annual general meeting of the Dance Alliance, Nasser complained strongly about the high cost of the Harlem visit while local companies were battling for survival.<sup>53</sup> She was backed up by Alfred Hinkel of the assumedly more “progressive” independent company, Jazzart.<sup>54</sup>

The polemic about the expensive visit from Harlem lasted several months and cast a shadow over what would prove, in retrospect, to be Nasser’s remarkable breakthrough in bringing renewing choreography to South African audiences. Adele Blank and her Free Flight Company, having just returned from Germany and Spain, where they had performed on invitation, reported to the annual meeting of the Dance Alliance that they had experienced ‘huge enthusiastic response of [the] international audience’<sup>55</sup> According to Dr. Fred Hagemann, Chairman of the Alliance:

the changing position of the cultural boycott, the need to place the arts on the national agenda, facilitating overseas visits by local companies, consulting with embassies and impresarios on proposed visits by overseas companies and the support they should offer the local dance community<sup>56</sup>

were high on the agenda of the Dance Alliance in 1992. Nasser was one step ahead of her colleagues in the Dance Alliance. She had vision, enterprising spirit and organisational abilities. This was apparent from the fact that she had already single-handedly carried through many of these points in the preceding month. Just a month after the annual general meeting, *The Star* reported that she had already undertaken a five-week tour to Europe and Israel, obtained the rights for several renewing overseas productions. Moreover several companies and choreographers had promised to visit South Africa.<sup>57</sup>

The prominence and enthusiasm of two Dutch dance companies during Nasser’s first outreach abroad to obtain rights on European works, was significant. The Nederlands Dans Teater (NDT) and Scapino Rotterdam

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52. A. VINASSA, “Collaborating with the enemy” in *Vrye Weekblad*, 1992.10.16; C. Anstey, “Three-course dance feast” in *Sunday Times*, 1992.08.09.

53. M. JENKINS, “Debate on dance” in *The Citizen*, 1992.08.12.

54. A. VINASSA, “Collaborating with the enemy” in *Vrye Weekblad*, 1992.10.16.

55. M. JENKINS, “Debate on Dance” in *The Citizen*, 1992.08.12.

56. M. JENKINS, “Debate on Dance” in *The Citizen*, 1992.08.12.

57. A. SICHEL, “Nasser scores coup for SA Dance” in *The Star*, 1992.08.17.

left a marked impression on the work of the PDC/STDC. By obtaining the rights to entrust the works of world-renowned choreographers such as Jiri Kylian and Ed Wubbe to South Africans, there were indications of a specific challenge and a sense of empowerment. It was the type of exposure that could stimulate creativity and a sense of evolution with South African choreographers. This awareness and a sense of far-sightedness motivated Nasser to remark:

It is important at this stage that the PDC build an international reputation, because dancers and audiences need the challenge.<sup>58</sup>

For a Director who had already gone far to involve each possible South African choreographer,<sup>59</sup> the enthusiasm to seek renewal, albeit abroad, was justified. She stressed that the PDC would always include a South African choreographer in their programmes.<sup>60</sup> By doing so she confirmed her end goal – to import foreign productions and still promote the local industry.

Along with the *NDT* and *Scapino*, Nasser had built up contacts with *Batsheva Dance Company* of Israel. From this came Shelly Sheer's already-mentioned production of *Death and the maiden*. Nasser's breakthrough was however momentarily overshadowed by the Harlem debacle.<sup>61</sup> There was also the criticism of a *New Nation* journalist (representative of black media opinions) because the PDC had not included any South African music in the October 1992 programme.<sup>62</sup> It was justified, but all commentators and critics agreed that they had been impressed by Robert North's intriguing drama.

In contrast to North's deeply moving classical modernism, the first Dutch work performed by South African dancers (only in the following year), was alienating, perturbing, prophetic social comment. Ed Wubbe's *Schlager* (Figure 4), a piece for four robot-like pairs and a doll figure, performed on eighties rock music of the group *Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft*, is about an anti-establishment group's protest against conformism and manipulation, while they simultaneously become elitist and manipulating by excluding individual members who cannot conform

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58. A. SICHEL, "Nasser scores coup for SA Dance" in *The Star*, 1992.08.17.

59. A. VINASSA, "Collaborating with the enemy" in *Vrye Weekblad*, 1992.10.16.

60. A. SICHEL, "Nasser scores coup for SA Dance" in *The Star*, 1992.08.17.

61. F.G. HAGEMANN, "Who should get the money? The dance funding debate" in *Vrye Weekblad* 1992.10.30.

62. ANON., "Time to dance to a different tune" in *New Nation*, 1992.10.30.



**Figure 4 Anton van Niekerk and Susan Abraham in Dutch choreographer Ed Wubbe's *Schlager*, 1994. Photograph: Edzard Meyberg**

to the whims of the group.<sup>63</sup> Because of a full programme, Wubbe could not come to South Africa himself, but honoured the undertaking he had given to Nasser earlier during her visit to the Netherlands by sending his colleague, choreologist Jacqueline Fahy. Under her leadership *Schlager* was rehearsed by the PDC in Johannesburg during the December of 1992.<sup>64</sup> Fahy's visit and the addition of *Schlager* to the repertoire of the PDC, made the local dance world aware of at least two international trends: aspiring to work across national cultural boundaries as far as possible; and striving to reconcile versatility (of style and theme) with technical precision.

Locally the new trend was introduced when *Schlager*, as well as *Family* by the American couple Daniel Shapiro and Joanie Smith were performed on the same programme. Shapiro and Smith's experience in Finland made

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63. ANON., "Nederlandse choreograaf se werk in Suid.Afrika te sien" in *Beeld*, 1993.03.29; ANON., "Uiteenlopende werke te sien" in *Transvaler*, 1993.04.01; ANON., "Mixed bag from dance group" in *Pretoria News Tonight* 1993.03.30.

64. A. SICHEL, "New dance challenges, enthralls" in *The Star Tonight*, 1992.12.22.

them aware that interaction across cultural borders may lead to shocking confrontation first, prior to becoming mind-broadening co-operation and exchange. This was a precious insight with which to start a South African visit, and food for thought for the South Africans. In a totally different way from *Schlager, Family*, based on American social problems, tied up with the challenges to South African society. Was it perhaps even an indication of how Americans influenced culture all over the world? Shapiro explained:

In the US, there's a whole move back towards human values. The '70s were all about 'me', the '80s were all go-go after money, and so far in the '90s we've totally blown it. Now people are asking, where are we at?, and dancers are asking, where's my art at? It's not about line and space. It's about real people, about trust, pain, co-operation, loss and rhapsodic enjoyment.<sup>65</sup> What do you want to say? That's what dancers are asking now<sup>66</sup>

Joanie Smith confirmed the universal appeal of their work:

The audience gets to see behind the public face of the family. We get to see behind the doors of their houses and witness both the pain and joy that is characteristic of all families.<sup>67</sup>

On the issue of technique, Smith explained, the ideal was to simultaneously "build strong technique and control while allowing for a natural, human way of moving".<sup>68</sup>

It remains an open question whether the third piece in the April 1993 programme of the PDC, the work, *A brush with colour* by the Company's Susan Abraham was really as weak as most critics suggested. Perhaps it was simply overshadowed by the two far more powerful foreign pieces on offer at the time.<sup>69</sup> In retrospect Robert Greig's comment is significant. It reminds one that during the early nineties, South Africa

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65. This phrase, especially, should have been welcomed by socially-conscious South Africans at a time of political transformation and wider awareness amongst whites of the problems of their black countrymen.

66. M. JENKINS, "A constant questioning" in *The Citizen*, 1993.03.16.

67. C. CANAVAN, "Dancing to Joanie's tune" in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1993.03.25.

68. C. CANAVAN, "Dancing to Joanie's tune" in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1993.03.25.

69. M. DENYS, "Trite new work spoils excellent line.up" in *Sunday Star*, 1993.04.11; A.SICHEL, "Must-see blend of zany-techno dance" in *The Star Tonight*, 1993.04.07; M. JENKINS, "Rebellion against conformity" in *The Citizen*, 1993.04.15.

started to discover the international context within which it had to find an own identity: He explained:

The risk was worthwhile. In the long run, all our arts are going to have to stand up to international comparison. It's tough leaving the security, false comfort, and reputations which have been a legacy of the cultural boycott.<sup>70</sup>

Abraham probably aspired to too high a level of abstraction; tried to say too much with a single piece of choreography. Was it too early to judge whether the exposure to overseas work would have a positive influence upon local creativity? Was Abraham over-ambitious and therefore failingly pretentious in her effort to 'keep up'? She herself was of the opinion that her effort to emulate the overseas choreographers by having the whole piece worked out, and then teaching it to the dancers, did not work for her.<sup>71</sup>

Judging from the success she achieved just a month before at the *Dance Umbrella* with her piece, *Bloodsport*, there was not too much to read into the failure of *A brush with colour*. It was probably an indication that local dancers would have to make a few smart steps to adjust themselves to a foreign procedure. Of rather more importance was the fact that American and European choreography appealed to South African audiences. Fred van Staden of *Vrye Weekblad* summarily applied Schlager's comment on fanaticism and exclusivity to the South African past and present. In retrospect it had a bearing on: "ingewikkelde bewegings met strak dissipline ... (wat) herinner aan 'n ruimte-eeuse weergawe van 'n drilparade op Voortrekkerhoogte ..."

while in terms of prospects, he noted:

Hierdie dansstuk gryp 'n mens ook aan omdat dit 'n waarskuwende vinger na vele groepe in ons ou klein deurmekaar landjie wys"<sup>72</sup>

The remaining two 1993 programmes of the PDC were dominated by American and local choreography. In August, another Smith and Shapiro

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70. R. GREIG, "Local dancer's ideas deserve praise" in *Business Day*, 1993.04.15.

71. M. JENKINS, "Isoteric but not indulgent" in *The Citizen*, 1993.08.13.

72. F. VAN STADEN, "Die lewe in beweging. Die vonke spat by Truk" in *Vrye Weekblad*, 1993.04.16. "...[in retrospect:] complex movements with rigid discipline ... remind one of a space-age drill-parade at Voortrekkerhoogte. [In prospect:] This dance piece impresses, because it points a warning finger at many groups in our mixed.up little old country." (Translation H.P.)

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contribution, *Two*, about young love, was on offer. There was also the New York choreographer, Elisa Monte, who came to Johannesburg to add her *Dreamtime* (based on Australian Aborigine traditions) to the repertoire of the company.<sup>73</sup> This was supplemented with the local works *Bloodsport* (Susan Abraham), *De Aar* (Sonje Mayo), and a new work by Candice Johnstone, *Commanding Thou's*.<sup>74</sup> Both *Bloodsport* and *De Aar* had been performed previously. Of these *Bloodsport* had been more popular. Johnstone's *Commanding Thou's* was disappointing. In the field of choreography, foreign inspiration apparently was slow to filter through. As in the first season of 1993, the foreign works received the best praise from critics. The lasting reputation nevertheless remained with the company who interpreted it. Maxine Denys remarked that the "mind boggles at the level of excellence that the PDC have reached."<sup>75</sup> Most remarkable of the local/foreign interaction during the second PDC season, was the reciprocal comment between *Two* and *Bloodsport*. *Two*, saw Anton van Niekerk and Susan Abraham as lovers, physically and psychologically on the same wavelength. They danced a delicate harmony. Local product *Bloodsport* with Melody Putu and Candice Johnstone, on the other hand, examined a violent relationship between man and woman, "a predatory mating game ... with vehement shifts of power between the sexes ...".<sup>76</sup>

Robert North's big hit, *Death and the maiden*, was the culminating point of the last season of the 1993 dance year. *In memory of*, the only new work in the October programme, by British-born Neville Campbell of Tumbuka Company, Zimbabwe, had a medium enthusiastic reception, and the always-popular local addition, Alfred Hinkel's multicultural *Bolero*, part of which was performed in gum-boots, was as spectacular as before.<sup>77</sup> The search for a substantial dance audience was, by far, not yet past for the PDC by the end of 1993. However the inclusion of exciting foreign work and the challenge which it provided to the dancers to surpass themselves, at least provided the critics with the vocabulary to

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73. A. SICHEL, "Top new works for PDC" in *The Star Tonight*, 1993.05.28.

74. M. JENKINS, "Esoteric but not indulgent" in *The Citizen*, 1993.08.13.

75. M. DENYS, "Unforgettable evening of dance" in *The Sunday Star*, 1993.08.22.

76. M. JENKINS, "Worthwhile PDC season" in *The Citizen*, 1993.08.16.

77. M. JENKINS, "New perspective to dance" in *The Citizen*, 1993.10.07; M. JENKINS, "Enigma, elegiac despair" in *The Citizen*, 1993.10.12; H. MACKIE, "Dances of life and death" in *Business Day*, 1993.10.13.

market the company with commendation.<sup>78</sup>

Having reliable American works such as *Family*, *Dreamtime*, and *Death and the maiden* in their repertoire to entice audiences to the programmes for the first two seasons, the PDC postponed co-operation with yet another international choreographer as a promise for the last season in 1994. Early in the year, Nasser re-committed herself to her ideal:

om die Truk Dansgeselskap 'n internasionale geselskap uit eie reg te maak ... oorsese toere [te] reël en ons dansers aan internasionale invloede bloot [te] stel.<sup>79</sup>

The international influence acquired for the final season, was still a remnant of Nasser's outreach overseas of two years earlier. Shelly Sheer, who came to coach the PDC's first Robert North work in 1992, returned to make North's *Entre Dos Aguas*, together with the popular *Death and the maiden*, part of the PDC repertoire.<sup>80</sup> The PDC-dancers must have liked and benefited from the repetition for *Entre Dos Aguas*: the conversion from one dance style to another (in this case, from flamenco, a highly traditional dance style having strict conventions, to the contemporary idiom of more free jazz movements),<sup>81</sup> was the type of challenge which South African choreographers busied themselves with throughout the nineties. Those who claimed to understand the philosophy of Bebe Miller, visiting choreographer from New York, enjoyed her highly idiosyncratic *Arena*;<sup>82</sup> for Canavan, it was proof that 'foreign' did not necessarily imply 'good'.<sup>83</sup>

Although all three seasons in 1994 at PACT's home front were dominated by American choreography, *Schlager*, introduced to southern audiences during the company's Cape tour in March, was also included

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78. M. BEUKES, "Truk.dans verdien meer as klein gehoor" in *Beeld*, 1993.10.12; C. CANAVAN, "Celebration of dance ... and life ... in PDC's riveting routine" in *Pretoria News Tonight*, 1993.10.28.

79. K. DE BEER, "Nou dans hulle na mekaar se pype" in *Die Burger*, 1994.03.03. "...to make the PACT Dance Company an international influence in its own right ..., to organize overseas tours, and to expose our dancers to international influences." (Translation H.P.)

80. M. JENKINS, "Sheer back at PDC" in *The Citizen*, 1994.07.20.

81. T. ODENDAAL, "Truk bring uitdagende dans met musiek van Hendrix en Led Zeppelin" in *Beeld*, 1994.10.18; M. JENKINS, "PDC's most expert yet" in *The Citizen*, 1994.10.22.

82. M. BEUKES, "Die suiwer dans is seëvierend" in *Beeld*, 1994.10.28; M. JENKINS, "PDC's most expert yet" in *The Citizen*, 1994.10.22.

83. C. CANAVAN, "Mediocre start to PDC's new season" in *Pretoria News*, 1994.10.21.



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in the first season.<sup>84</sup> Germaine Glueck's comment after that work's Cape debut, was that it "immediately marked the company with a professional stamp".<sup>85</sup>



**Figure 5. This pose by Charene Griggs was used to publicize the PDC's first performance of Ed Wubbe's *Kate's Gallery* in 1997. Photograph: Edzard Meyberg**

Wubbe's technically exhausting, thematically turbulent work, at that stage the only Dutch work in the company's growing repertoire, clearly had a great impact on the identity of the PDC. Critics in Pretoria, seeing the work for the second time in 1994, were not impressed, however, with the insufficient way in which the dancers had brought Wubbe's instructions and his intentions together.<sup>86</sup> Dance, probably the most transient of all art forms, can only be reinvented with each new performance. In as much as *Schlager* had initially been the creation of Ed Wubbe, it was to become the creation of the dance company that obtained the rights to interpret it. 'Replicas' were to be tested against the

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84. C. MITCHELL, "Exciting dance offering" in *The Argus*, 1994.03.04.

85. G. GLUECK, "No mawkish sentiment" in *The Herald*, 1994.03.10.

86. M. JENKINS, "Spirit and invention" in *The Citizen*, 1994.05.09.

memory of the 'original', which in fact had stopped existing the moment it had been performed. If moving away from choreographers' initial instructions should be considered as a gradual weakening of their once powerful choreographic intentions, it was to prove of vital importance for the PDC to keep contact with the foreigners, such as Wubbe, from whom they had derived some of their most defining dance works.

After the triumph of local choreography in 1995 (which included Candice Johnstone's *In this heart*, and a PDC tour to Thailand, loaded with established South African works such as *Bloodsport*, *Bolero* and *Me and You*)<sup>87</sup> the opportunity arrived during 1996 for the company to collaborate with European choreographers again. It is conspicuous that the Low Countries were prominently involved in the stimulation of South-African, and specifically PDC dancers. Candice Johnstone received a bursary from the Flemish Ministry of Culture to study under Brussels choreographer Anna Theresa de Keersmaeker.<sup>88</sup> While the Dutch embassy in Pretoria provided funds for promising young South Africans to be trained by PDC dancers, senior PDC dancer Anton van Niekerk, co-ordinator of the Dutch project, received a grant for studying in Europe. As part of the PDC Dutch Community Project, fifteen young South African dancers were provided with funds to repetition a piece for the coming *Dance Umbrella*, under PDC-dancer/choreographer Mandla Mcunu. Anton van Niekerk used his grant from *Michel Tesson Performing Arts Trust* to visit Israel, where he strengthened the existing bonds of his company with Shelly Sheer and the Batsheva Dance Company. A measure of mutual influencing between South African and international contemporary dance began to realise. Where in the past, Sheer had helped the PDC to repetition Robert North's works, Van Niekerk now had the opportunity to lecture to Sheer's company. Esther Nasser's liaison with Jiri Kylian and Ed Wubbe during her visit abroad in 1992, now yielded fruit. Van Niekerk would visit Kylian's Nederlands Dans Teater in The Hague and Wubbe's Scapino Rotterdam, in order to gain valuable experience in dance training, and choreographic and management proficiency.<sup>89</sup>

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87. C. CANAVAN, "Technikon gears up for annual dance season ... One of the best, *Pretoria News*" in 1995.06.12; E. MAKHAYA, "Pact dancers on Thai tour", *Sowetan*, 1995.07.12.

88. T. ODENDAAL, "Truk se Candice kry beurs vir studie in België" in *Beeld*, 1996.10.08.

89. M. JENKINS, "Dutch chance for young dancers" in *The Citizen*, 1996.11.15; S. PESKIN, "Innovation the name of the dance game" in *Pretoria News Interval*, 1996.12.13; M. JENKINS, "PDC set for gold" in *The Citizen*, 1997.01.30.

For the PDC's May 1997 season, the Dutch Embassy and Scapino Rotterdam sponsored the performance of *Kate's Gallery* (Figures 5 and 6) – a second work by Wubbe, to be added together with *Schlager* to the repertoire of the PDC. *Kate's gallery* is an abbreviated version of Wubbe's *Kathleen* (1992), with which he established himself, after sensational shows in New York, as the trendsetter for renewal in the field of contemporary dance. The PDC was the only other company to whom *Scapino* would allocate the right to perform the work. Like *Schlager*, it is a sombre, disillusioning work, focusing on relationships between men and women, and rendering subtle comment on late twentieth century confusion about gender roles. The flexible boundaries between idolisation and abuse of women; idealising and demonising of men, are danced out by seven men and seven women dressed in black. To Heather Mackie, it was “an ugly, aggressive, brutal work, full of urban violence”.<sup>90</sup> It makes sense when one considers that Wubbe initially drew his inspiration from a nineteenth century album of American criminals and obscene graffiti on a concrete wall.<sup>91</sup> Even so, the recognition of men and women's disorganised actions in this familiar-ugly environment creates unexpected pathos. Schalk Schoombie pointed out the intermittent eerie, enigmatic, and refreshing interaction between men and women when he commented:

Wubbe se woordeskat is oneindig vindingryk en verrassend, 'n kakofonie van industriële klanke en verbysterende dinamiese beweging, terwyl dit met die intellek smokkel.<sup>92</sup>

*Kate's Gallery* was a *tour de force* which elevated the PDC to the internationally competitive dimension. The critics' evaluation of the local works, *Bolero* and the new creation of Debbie Rakusin, *And then there were twelve*, were, in most cases, inversely equal to their impression of *Kate's Gallery*. Those who were impressed with Wubbe's intellectual challenges, his mocking of certainties, his unmasking of “beauty”, found the local works too boisterous and without essence. Those who were disappointed with Wubbe's sombre art, found a balance in the pure celebration of sensuality and beauty of movement in the local works of Alfred Hinkel and Debbie Rakusin.

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90. H. MACKIE, “PACT's sophisticated works blur dancing distinctions” in *Business Day*, 1997.05.23.

91. M. JENKINS, “A first for the PDC” in *The Citizen*, 1997.05.08.

92. S. SCHOOMBIE, “Ed Wubbe ruk en pluk die liggaam en siel” in *Beeld*, 1997.05.22.

## Conclusion

At the end of the decade, the dilemma of the PDC/STDC was becoming increasingly clear: As at the beginning of the decade, the challenge remained: how to fill the house with supporters; how to accommodate the divergent perceptions of audiences about contemporary dance: how to renew without alienating; how to meet expectations and simultaneously create new expectations. The situation boiled down to an ironic turn-about of that which had been 'wrong' at the beginning of the decade. In the early nineties, local choreographers with their strong social awareness and experimental rebelliousness created works that were simply not spectacular enough to lure large audiences. 'Beautiful' foreign works such as *Death and the Maiden* were to bring more balance.

At the end of the decade, the company's repertoire included foreign works with strong social comment. In contrast to the earlier 'unpopular', 'undisciplined' local works, the foreign works were performed with fine technique and precision, but in a way it actually became 'too spectacular'. Audiences did not want intellectual challenges only, they wanted to be entertained in the first place. Those members of the PDC/STDC who, having arrived in the international world of dance thanks to a decade of foreign exposure, now had the delicate task of maintaining a balance between the 'intellectual practise of their art' and 'popularity'. When Schoombie warned local choreographers at the end of the twentieth century that they were stepping too lightly,<sup>93</sup> he had their respectability in the world of dance theatre at heart. The obverse of the coin was that a company such as the STDC was dependent upon a substantial audience. If Schoombie's fellow critics were any measure of the expectations of the audiences who supported dance, it was accepted that the PDC/STDC had divergent tastes to satisfy. The multicultural, hybrid nature of contemporary dance was no longer questioned, but the manner in which it manifested on stage, proved to be popular amongst a select minority, rather than the masses. Contemporary dance has, for the most part, been viewed as anti-establishment, rather than mainstream culture; it wants to question, it wants to challenge, it does not want to reassure; it does not want to be easy – - therefore it will not easily draw very large audiences either. AS one 'establishment' is replaced with another, dancers will continually want to reinvent their art. In order to attract an audience to partake in such a challenge to society, however,

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93. S. SCHOOMBIE, "Dans in Suid.Afrika kan veel by buitelanders leer, *Beeld*, 1998.01.14; S. SCHOOMBIE, "Europese dansinsette inspirerend" in *Beeld*, 1999.12.20.

dancers have to compromise and be entertaining as well.

## **Postscript**

The South African Government's decision to "mothball" the State Theatre in the winter of 2000 inadvertently implied the dissolution of the State Theatre Dance Company. It is ironical that the Company was disbanded at a time when it had firmly established itself as the leading dance company in South Africa and after it had proven itself successful in drawing substantial audiences – probably the most representative dance audiences seen in South Africa to date. "Bums on seats", it turned out eventually, is not what the company was dependent on for survival after all. Although the closing down of the State Theatre and the retrenchment of its approximately five hundred employees were ascribed to financial mismanagement, the step was in close accordance with the 1996 White Paper envisioning the conversion of the State Theatre, the Nico Malan and Sand du Plessis Theatres and the Natal Playhouse from production companies to facilities, or playhouses, at the disposal of independent companies.

High on the agenda with the reopening of the State Theatre in 2001, was an effort to do away with the image of the Theatre as a generator of white, elitist, Euro-centric performances – precisely what the STDC itself was striving towards. Adding to the irony, several members of this Company, who had been so occupied with giving local content to a 'universal' (still Western?) art form, left South Africa after their retrenchment and went to work for dance companies in Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands.<sup>94</sup> Which independent companies will perform in Pretoria and who their audience will be in the future, remain to be seen. What the brief history of the State Theatre Dance Company has proven beyond doubt, is the deep isolation in which the South African performing arts had been stifled until the late 1980s, and that the return to the international arena in the 1990s was a liberating encounter for black as well as white dancers – and a

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94. D. ACCONE, "Cultural cryogenics ice the State" in *The Star Tonight*, 2000.06.20, p. 19; A. SICHEL, "What will rise from the ashes?" in *The Star Tonight*, 2000.06.27, p. 2; Personal information: Ms Esther Nasser, State Theatre, Pretoria, 2000.10.09.

challenging experience for their audiences.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Die Staatsteater Dansgroep en die ontwikkeling van kontemporêre dans in Suid-Afrika**

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die resepsie van dansteater deur Suid-Afrikaanse gehore en kritici gedurende die laaste dekade van die twintigste eeu, met spesifieke verwysing na die Staatsteater Dansgeselskap (STDG). Toe die geselskap in 2000, met die sluiting van die Staatsteater ontbind is, was dit alom gereken as die beste in Suid-Afrika. Die sukses van die STDG kon in 'n groot mate toegeskryf word aan Amerikaanse en Europese insette - enersyds wat betref artistieke inspirasie uit werke van buitelandse choreograwe en andersyds wat betref die ontwikkeling van plaaslike dansers (danstegniek en dansdissipline). Die argument in hierdie artikel is dat die multikulturele aard van post-moderne dans nie in die kunsvorm self gesoek moet word nie. Verhoogoptredes vereis kennis van die Westerse danstradisies en konformerings tot 'n aantal baie "Westerse" teaterkonvensies, wat die rigoristiese dissiplinering van dansers se liggame insluit. Wat inhoud betref, is eietydse dans wel sterk multikultureel, hibridies en vloeibaar. Dit waarna Craig Canavan verwys het as "tak[ing] ethnic influences and fit[ting] them to a theatrical context," is gedurende die jare negentig met groot innovasie deur die dansers en choreograwe van die STDG bemeester. Dit bevestig dat blootstelling aan internasionale choreografie hulle uitgedaag en bemagtig het om 'n eie kreatiwiteit te laat ontluik. Die resultaat was soms meelewende, soms provokerende, kommentaar op die skepping van identiteit in Suid-Afrika.