

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> Plymouth University
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts (Panel D - UoA 35)
<b>Title of case study:</b> Adugna Community Dance Company: Empowering disabled dancers and changing attitudes toward disabled people through contemporary dance in Ethiopia
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Although Adam Benjamin's research has greatly influenced contemporary dance in the UK and elsewhere through his development and advocacy of inclusive practice, this case study focuses on his impact on contemporary dance and disability culture in Ethiopia. By introducing integrated practice to Adugna Community Dance Company in Addis Ababa (in which able-bodied and disabled dancers perform together), and continuing to foster its development through his choreographic and mentoring work with its current Artistic Directors, he has helped to transform the lives of individual disabled performers as well as strongly contributing to the socially-driven nature, values and aesthetics of contemporary Ethiopian dance.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>This case study is underpinned by three inter-related strands of Adam Benjamin's research: 1) training and choreography for integrated dance, which began with his co-founding of CandoCo Dance Company (1990-98); 2) dance for social inclusion in Ethiopia; and 3) the use of improvisation in training, performance and choreographic processes. Although predating Benjamin's employment by Plymouth University in 2008 (prior to which he was an independent practitioner-scholar), his commitment to each, separately and together, has continued to shape and characterise his research. This is largely disseminated as reflexive practice-as-research as a facilitator and choreographer within professional contexts. His researching of integrated choreography, through productions such as <i>Slight</i> (2008) and <i>This Is</i> (2010), aims to resist increasingly dominant expectations of professional inclusive dance practice that revolve around the virtuosity of 'disabled' bodies. Especially when interrogating the moves between 'community' and 'professional' contexts, Benjamin has thus sought to offer alternative models of choreographic structures, both formal and poetic, to enable dancers of very differing physicality to co-exist as equal contributors upon the stage.</p> <p>In 2000, supported by the British Council, Benjamin made a series of research visits to Ethiopia to evaluate the possible outcomes of an arts intervention with disadvantaged groups. As a result, he brought together a group of young people with disabilities (later known as Adugna Potentials) and introduced them to the Adugna, the country's first contemporary dance company (founded in 1996). He worked with Adugna to explore how integrated dance could be embedded within the company's ethos and how it could be developed in an Ethiopian context. Benjamin questioned whether, and how, this practice could offer anything of value in a region of extreme poverty and in a culture that shuns disabled people. In <i>Making an Entrance: Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-Disabled Dancers</i> (2002), he suggested that "Adugna dancers might be able to use their performance skills as a way of raising awareness and... introduce dance as a social, artistic and remedial activity". Reflecting on his research in Ethiopia and elsewhere, the book presents a model of performance that takes into account ethics, access, competition, group dynamics and training.</p> <p>In 2009, Benjamin co-choreographed <i>A Holding Space</i> at Sadler's Wells with Russell Maliphant for the dancers Junaid Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie, as part of Dance United's <i>Destino</i> programme. Sendi and Demissie are key members of Adugna, and Benjamin had worked with them when they were children. <i>A Holding Space</i> researched how to choreograph intersubjectivity and lived experience – in particular, that of the dancers who had transitioned from street children, through community dance, to professional artists. Benjamin's approach drew upon his on-going investigation of improvisation in his performances as a founding member of 5 Men Dancing (2008 and 2010), as well as with Kirstie Simson, Kenzo Kusuda, Jordi Cortés, Chieko Matsumura and</p>

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Takugi Oyamada. This practice centres on 'deep listening', refined through Benjamin's experiential modelling of integrated dance in which one must hear and respond to unfamiliar and 'other' bodies, as a springboard from which to blur art and life.

### 3. References to the research

- 1) *A Holding Space*, choreographed by Adam Benjamin and Russell Maliphant, performed by Junaid Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie (commissioned by Dance United and Sadler's Wells as part of the *Destino Project*). Preview and lecture demonstration by the choreographers and performers at Plymouth University (Feb 2009); Premier at Sadler's Wells, London (12-13 March 2009), followed by UK tour, with accompanying programme of workshops: The Point, Eastleigh; Stage@Leeds; The Junction, Cambridge; Contact Theatre, Manchester; Laban, London (March/April 2009). Performances at the National Theatre, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (21-22 May 2009).

*A Holding Space* was also performed by different dancers with two other works by Maliphant at the Maillon Wacken, Strasbourg, France (May 2010).

A re-worked version of *A Holding Space*, choreographed by Adam Benjamin and Russell Maliphant and performed by Junaid Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie, premiered at Plymouth University (September 2012), followed by performances at The Place, London.

- 2) Caswell Coggins (dir.), *Destino: A Contemporary Dance Story*. A Duet Pictures Production in association with Arts Council England. HD Film, 56 minutes, 2010. This documentary, featuring an extended discussion of the project, its context and process, as well as footage of *A Holding Space*, has been screened extensively including at the ICA and Sadler's Wells, London (2010); at film festivals in South Africa, Italy, Portugal, USA, the Netherlands and across the UK; and in rotation on the Community Channel (Sky 539, Virgin 233, Freeview 87) in 2010 and 2012.
- 3) Adam Benjamin, *Making an Entrance: Theory & Practice for Disabled and Non-disabled Dancers* (Routledge, 2002). "*Making an Entrance* is one of the most important books on teaching dance in some time. Nothing less than 'an attempt to change the model, and some of the ways we think about dance and dance education' (p. xvii), it should be required reading for all choreographers, teachers and students of dance" (review in *Theatre Research International*, 2003). 2<sup>nd</sup> edition has been commissioned and is currently in preparation.
- 4) Caswell Coggins and Andrew Coggins (dir.), *A Holding Space*. A film reflecting on the process of creating the duet, made while re-working it in September 2012. Premiered at The Place, London, October 2012. Available online: <http://vimeo.com/54290251>
- 5) A large body of choreographic research by Adam Benjamin for integrated companies, developed through improvisational processes. Since 2008, this includes: *Slight* for the Fathom Dance project, performed at Dance City Newcastle, Stockton Arts Centre, Decibel Performing Arts Showcase, Plymouth University, and Lillian Baylis, Sadlers Wells, London (2008-10); and *This is* for Croi Glan Integrated Dance Company, performed at Absolute Fringe in Dublin, Abhainn Ri Festival in Callan, Ballina Arts Centre in Co Mayo (all Ireland), Sant Andreu Teatre in Barcelona (2010-11), and Dampfzentrale Arts Festival, Switzerland (2013)
- 6) Adam Benjamin, 'Meetings with Strangers' in Diane Amans (ed.) *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

### 4. Details of the impact

The UK success of *Destino* (in part by showcasing new work by leading choreographers like Benjamin, Maliphant and Hofesh Schechter) led to a similar project in Ethiopia. While the programme at Sadler's Wells featured a large-scale intergenerational community piece including

groups of hard-to-reach young people, it did not include performers with physical disabilities. Its counterpart in Addis Ababa, *Wekt (Four Seasons)* – made as part of *Destino in Ethiopia* and staged alongside *A Holding Space* – was performed by a mixed ability cast of 50 including the Potentials dancers (10 with post-polio paralysis and one in a wheelchair with severe cerebral palsy). *Wekt* was choreographed by Sendi and Demissie, who says that working with Benjamin and Maliphant on *A Holding Space* significantly helped to refine their own skills in co-choreography.

According to Dance United's Evaluation Report, *Destino* in Ethiopia secured large enthusiastic audiences (2700 people over 2 days at the National Theatre), gave disadvantaged individuals hope and self-respect, enabled Sendi and Demise to become future cultural leaders, and precipitated change for the better within Ethiopian communities. It quoted one member of the audience as saying that "*three thousand people ... will leave the auditorium with a completely different picture about the role of the disabled ... Those messages will be passed on.*"

Since 2009, Sendi and Demissie have separately choreographed three different integrated pieces that have toured to venues across Ethiopia as well as Tanzania, Ghana, and South Africa. They say that Benjamin "*helped in making us into experts*" and that he continues to remind them of the importance of detail, depth and the role of improvisation, through which one discovers "*how [a dancer's] body works... where you can give weight*" (Sendi, 2013), in choreographing for integrated companies.

In 2010, Sendi and Demissie became co-directors of Adugna. Now also a judge on *Ethiopian Idol*, Sendi says that this means "I need to ensure the development of contemporary dance in my country". This is clearly an inclusive vision; to mark the "re-creation of the company" he choreographed an integrated piece called *Adwa* with the Potentials. The aim is for the Potentials to consistently participate in all three elements of Adugna's mission: contemporary dance performances "*from the community, to the community*", outreach, and international performances. The company website states that "*The impact of the expanding community outreach work with other young disabled people and [the Potentials'] performances cannot be underestimated.*"

In March 2013, building on the momentum of *A Holding Space*, Benjamin returned to Ethiopia to research the second edition of *Making an Entrance* and to run a choreographic lab, mentoring Sendi and Demissie during the development of new integrated performances using improvisatory strategies. In interviews with nine members of Adugna who had worked with Benjamin both between 2000-2003 and in 2013, all mention the personal motivation of changing Ethiopian attitudes toward disabled people. For able-bodied members, this is modeled on their own experiences of working with disabled dancers for the first time, and for those with disabilities, it is tied to their increasing sense of self-esteem, standard of living and professional expectations. All speak of Benjamin's role in helping to create these personal opportunities.

Yitsadel says that, "*when I was a child, I couldn't go to school, I couldn't find the work. I couldn't do things, I couldn't go on the transportation so I felt like I was living other people's lives... I want those things to change [for others].*" Andualem Kebede says that "*when I move in the space I feel free; I feel very proud... in the street, when people are watching me I [think it is] because they probably saw me on TV dancing. So, I don't think they are watching me because I'm disabled.*" Tilahun Jemaneh competed as a powerlifter in the 2004 Paralympics and now is a sports teacher. He believes that the only way to change negative attitudes toward disability in Ethiopia is by showing strength and capability "in action". He says Adugna gave him the confidence, strength and performance skills (including 'a sense of audience') to compete on a national and international stage and that he earns more than his other disabled colleagues because of this experience and expertise. Terefwork Negussie, who is unable to move or to talk, says that she "*learned how to express what she feels inside through movement*" and that she wants to become a choreographer. Benjamin has put her in contact with Lisa Simpson, a profoundly disabled dancer in the UK with whom he developed 'the Simpson Board'. This allows people with no speech and limited voluntary control over their muscles to communicate ideas about movement in a studio.

Opportunities for funding via NGOs have been cut severely in Ethiopia; Aduagna is currently on the verge of losing its studio due to redevelopment. The Potentials were unable to train and perform together during 2012 because there wasn't enough money to pay allowances (to replace other income) or transportation expenses to rehearsals. Benjamin's choreographic lab had a galvanising effect; the company was able to work together daily for 2 weeks to create new performances to act as 'calling cards' in their renewed fight for visibility and funding. His visit also enabled connections to be made with Addis Ababa University for the first time, presenting work-in-progress to a large group of postgraduate students, and opening opportunities to use the University's resources to help sustain the company.

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 1) *Fusion: A week with Aduagna Dance Company*, Siobhan Mckeown (dir.) 2013. In addition to the footage used in this short documentary (filmed March 2013), there is also approximately 25 hours of additional video material available for auditing (referenced above), including interviews with Junaid Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie as well as 7 other company members; rehearsal footage of the company working with Benjamin; and documentation of performances and discussions at Addis Ababa University and the International School. Transcripts are also available for auditing.
- 2) *Destino: A Contemporary Dance Story*, Caswell Coggins (dir.), 2010. Includes interviews with many members of Aduagna.
- 3) Independent Evaluation Reports, compiled & written by representatives of Dance United: *Destino at Sadler's Wells* (January/March 2009), *Destino on the Road* (February/April 2009), *Destino in Addis Ababa* (May 2009).
- 4) Aduagna Dance Company website [online] <http://www.adugnadance.org/index.php/the-story.html>
- 5) Jane Plastow, 'Dance and Transformation: The Aduagna Community Dance Theatre, Ethiopia' in Richard Boon and Jane Plastow (eds.) *Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Video interview with Prof Plastow is also available (Addis Ababa, 21 March 2013).
- 6) Jo Parkes, *Mobile Dance* website, including and an account of her 'Trip to Ethiopia to work with Adam Benjamin and the Aduagna dancers, April 7th - 25th 2003' [online] <http://www.mobiledance.org/pages/ethiopia.htm>
- 7) The Place website [online] <http://www.theplace.org.uk/5352/news/britains-leading-choreographers-celebrate-a-brgreat-day-at-the-place.html>. Adam Benjamin included as one of "the contemporary choreographers who have made the biggest impact on dance in Britain over the past 40 years" as part of The Place's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, 2010
- 8) Adam Benjamin, 'Building dreams in Ethiopia,' *Dance UK News: The Equal Issue*, Summer 2003, Issue 49, pp. 8-9.
- 9) Adam Benjamin and Lisa Simpson, 'Case Study' in Isabel Jones (ed.), *Dance and disabled people handbook: Pathway to practice for dance leaders working with disabled people* (Foundation for Community Dance, 2010).