



EXPERIMENTA FOCUS: STEPHEN DWOSKIN

Ballet Black

Followed by a discussion of the making of the film and its legacy by two of its stars, Jacqueline Boatswain (Shameless, Cuckoo) and Colin Charles (Cats – original production, English National Opera).

There is still no book about the Ballets Nègres. Stephen Dwoskin heard its story from his friend Astley Harvey, who he learned had joined the troupe ‘when he was young and freshly arrived in England’ from Jamaica. It had been founded in 1946 by Berto Pasuka, a Jamaican dancer who had come to London before World War II. The dancers and musicians, almost all Black, were from across the Empire – two years before Windrush – with about a third of them born in Britain. From a first season in a Notting Hill theatre, they performed all over Europe over the next half-dozen years, but by the time of Pasuka’s early death in 1963 the Ballets Nègres was all but forgotten.

Dwoskin had arrived in London from New York in 1964, and made his name as an underground filmmaker, an emissary from the milieu of Andy Warhol. He settled in Notting Hill, by then a centre of the West Indian community, and had his first public screening as part of the first Notting Hill Festival in 1966. Harvey, whom Dwoskin first met as a house painter, had had occasional acting work after the Ballets Nègres years, and began appearing in Dwoskin’s films, many of them shot in his home, in the early 1970s. Later, notably, Harvey was cast in Horace Ové’s *A Hole in Babylon* (1979). When circumstances dictated that Dwoskin turn pro and start a production company, Urbane, Harvey was co-director.

Their second production, devised as a film that would bring the Ballets Nègres out of obscurity, was *Ballet Black* (1986), commissioned by the Arts Council after Channel 4 turned it down. With his production manager Trish Thomas, Dwoskin interviewed numerous original members, including John Lagey, latterly famous as the wrestler Johnny Kwango, and trawled the personal archive of Pasuka’s friend and principal dancer Richie Riley, who served as a consultant on the film along with Harvey and composer Leonard Salzedo.

There were affinities between Pasuka and Dwoskin. ‘Most of Berto’s work was spontaneous,’ one of the original dancers, Pamela Johnson, recalled, ‘but he gave us the strong basic steps and the mime.’ No two nights were the same: ‘If he felt the audience with him, you knew the ballet would go on.’ Likewise, most of Dwoskin’s early films were improvised, product of an in-the-moment collaboration between filmmaker and – almost always female – subject, starting from a simple premise. Though *Ballet Black* is a documentary, with a story to tell, it tries to be similarly spontaneous. Instead of unfolding the Ballets Nègres story as something already known, it simulates the process of discovery, with the archive material presented raw, not as windows on to the past, but as fragments from it.

In place of an overarching voiceover, there is a mosaic of voices on the soundtrack. The first is Harvey’s, reading in full a letter that Pasuka wrote to Riley in Jamaica in 1945, six years after their last meeting, primarily to encourage him to come to London. Details that a more conventional documentary would cut or annotate here suggest a history that is otherwise not spelled out, as well as giving the texture of one of the troupe’s central relationships directly, rather than through narration.

The Ballets Nègres' repertoire itself is brought into the present. Dwoskin engaged a group of dancers to reconstruct it, and made the crucial decision to film them rehearsing the big number, 'They Came' – as it happened, at the Mercury Theatre, site of Dwoskin's first screening two decades earlier – with Riley advising on the choreography. What the film shows is a company coming into being, learning how to work together – and meeting its forebears, in sequences filmed at a pub reunion, where the veterans are still dancing.

'To be in a company where the majority of people were Black was quite astonishing, because normally I would be in a show where I was the only Black person,' recalls Joy Richardson, then at the start of an acting career that has recently included *Small Axe: Red, White and Blue* (2020). *Ballet Black* was her first film role – though she had shot a scene for Menelik Shabazz's *Burning an Illusion* (1981) that ended up on the cutting-room floor. 'The dance world was not my world,' she says, but recalls Dwoskin saying to dancers, 'Be yourself, rather than a dancer. Some of you are just being dancers,' and to actors 'Be in your body and connect. You are telling a story.' As a result of this, she says, 'We had to find a different language.'

In another dance, 'Blood', she performs opposite Harvey, who reads out the dance's synopsis to camera even while performing it. As with the rehearsal sequences, what might in other hands be called a distancing effect is not there to lay bare the artifice, but to flaunt it. Pasuka, who drew on disparate sources, West African, Caribbean, Black American, and European, often using highly stereotypical imagery, was not aiming for authenticity, but to forge a new kind of dramatic dance, and it's this that *Ballet Black* celebrates.

Ballet Black was a personal film for Dwoskin beyond Harvey's involvement. He had begun to learn to dance during childhood, but at the age of nine contracted polio and lost the use of his legs. He remained fascinated by dancers – one of his very first films, made in 1962, never exhibited, features Yvonne Rainer, then at the start of her career, rehearsing in a studio in the East Village. Over the course of nearly 40 years, from *Trixi* (1971) to his late work *The Sun and the Moon* (2008), one of his most important collaborators was the ballerina Beatrice 'Trixie' Cordua. But *Ballet Black* was his only fully fledged dance film. A salute to artists of a previous generation who had ended up on the margins, *Ballet Black* was itself given a perfunctory release, and was not shown on television; but now, another generation on, it can be seen.

Henry K. Miller, *Sight and Sound*, March 2022

Further reading: Lucy Reynolds, 'Ballet Black', *Screen*, Spring 2016

Jacqueline Boatswain is an actor, dancer, and singer whose West End roles include *Kiss Me Kate*, *Chicago*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. She has numerous television credits, including long-running characters in *Grange Hill*, *Hollyoaks* and *Doctors*. Her recent roles include *Shameless*, *Vera*, *Bancroft*, *Miracle Workers*, *Shakespeare & Hathaway*, David Hare's *Collateral*, and alongside Orlando Bloom and Cara Delevingne in *Carnival Row*.

Colin Charles trained at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance. His West End credits include *We Will Rock You*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Miss Saigon*, *Cats* and *Five Guys Named Moe*; and he has appeared in the English National Opera productions of *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Faust* and *Aida*. He is currently performing in *Dirty Dancing* at the Dominion Theatre.

BALLET BLACK

Director: Stephen Dwoskin
Production Company: Urbane Limited
Sponsor: Arts Council of Great Britain
Executive Producer: Rodney Wilson
Producer: Stephen Dwoskin
Production Manager: Trish Thomas
Script: Stephen Dwoskin
Photography: Stephen Dwoskin
Assistant Photographer: Véronique Goël
Animated Sequence: Alan Hodge
Animation Rostrum: Jack Warner
Editors: Stephen Dwoskin, Anthea Kennedy
Art Director: Bernard Trude
Ballet Sketches: Richie Riley, Joy Richardson, Astley Harvey
Costumes: Véronique Goël
Make-up: James Rowe
Music: Shaun Tozer
Music ('They Came'): Leonard Salzedo
Piano: Steve Halliwell
Percussion: Simon Limbrick
Additional percussion: Jon Wilkinson

Keyboards: Shaun Tozer
Original Ballets Nègres music: Prince Kari-kari & His Tam-tam Orchestra
Music Arrangers: Shaun Tozer, Simon Limbrick, Jon Wilkinson
Music Recording: Jon Wilkinson
Choreography: Richie Riley, Raymond Maclean
Special Dance Sequences: Bolaji Adeola, Charles Keele
Sound Recording: Roger Ollerhead, Anthea Kennedy, Alan Hodge
Consultants: Astley Harvey, Richie Riley, Leonard Salzedo

With

Paul Bailey, Jacqui Boatswain, Beaux Bryant, Colin Charles, Raymond Maclean, Michael Noble, Julia De Peyer, Joy Richardson, Marcia Waldron, Desmond Williams, Honeyboy Williams (*dancers*) Ben Johnson, Astley Harvey, Pamela Johnson, Johnny Lagey, Pearl Johnson, Richie Riley, Tony Johnson, Patricia Clover, Leonard Salzedo (*original Ballets Nègres members*) Rosalind Stockwell, John Warner, Astley Harvey, Ben Johnson, Leonard Salzedo, Pat Salzedo (*voices*)

UK 1986
83 mins

EXPERIMENTA FOCUS: STEPHEN DWOSKIN

Ballet Black + discussion with two of the film's stars, Jaqueline Boatswain and Colin Charles
Tue 15 Feb 18:10
The Gaze of Stephen Dwoskin
Wed 23 Feb 18:45
The Sun and the Moon + intro by writer Paul Clinton
Thu 24 Feb 18:20

REGULAR PROGRAMME

BFI Future Film Festival
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Seniors' Free Matinee: The Night of the Hunter + intro by BFI programmer David Somerset
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Wed 23 Feb 17:50
Terror Vision: The People under the Stairs
Thu 24 Feb 20:40
Relaxed Screening: Keep the Change + discussion
Mon 28 Feb 20:10

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