

Talking together about Écoles des Sables: Alesandra Seutin and Jonathan Burrows with Lee Miller

Seutin, A., Burrows, J. & Miller, L.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Seutin, A, Burrows, J & Miller, L 2021, 'Talking together about Écoles des Sables: Alesandra Seutin and Jonathan Burrows with Lee Miller', *Choreographic Practices*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 177-185.

https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/chor_00037_7

DOI 10.1386/chor_00037_7

ISSN 2040-5669

ESSN 2040-5677

Publisher: Intellect

© Ellis, S & Miller, L 2021. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in *Choreographic Practices*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 177-185, 2021, https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/chor_00037_7

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

10.1386/chor_00037_7

Interviews

Alesandra Seutin | Jonathan Burrows | Lee Miller

Having the conversation and questioning things

Having the conversation and questioning things: Alesandra Seutin and Jonathan Burrows with Lee Miller

Abstract: on an evening in early November 2021, Lee met with Alesandra and Jonathan to discuss a series of workshops undertaken at École des Sables, Senegal. What emerged from this conversation was a discussion of the need to interrogate how things are done in an attempt to effect change.

Keywords: questioning, choreography, training, 'truth'

Alesandra Seutin

École des Sables

Jonathan Burrows

Coventry University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8074-0591>

Lee Miller

Edge Hill University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6804-3427>

Earlier this year, Alesandra Seutin, founder of Vocab Dance and worldwide ambassador of the Germaine Acogny Technique, was appointed as co-artistic director of International

Dance Centre, École des Sables, Senegal. She invited Jonathan Burrows to collaborate on planned workshops there, and what follows is a conversation between them and editor Lee Miller, on the evening of 2 November 2021.

Lee Miller (LM): Thanks both for your time. If you're ok, I'll jump right in. How did the project come about, what was the driver that brought things together?

Alesandra Seutin (AS): What brought us together in Senegal? I had recently become a co-artistic director of the school (École des Sables) ... and in a way, the legacy of the other director was that he had started a three-year course – a diploma course for dancers based in Africa – running three months, three times a year, for three years. I had already spoken to the other director about Jonathan visiting the school; I found the idea to offer an interesting exchange; it would be a great opportunity for the students ... but it didn't happen somehow. So, when I took on the role of co-artistic director, and there was a teacher that couldn't come on to the programme, I decided to invite Jonathan instead of another teacher ... so that's how it all happened ...

LM: Jonathan, what were the inquiries that you found yourself wanting to activate in this encounter?

Jonathan Burrows (JB): Well, the first thing to say is that although I'd never been out to École des Sables, I had this strong connection to it. In some sense, because I've been a visiting member of faculty at P.A.R.T.S., which is the school of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in Brussels for nearly 25 years, and P.A.R.T.S., for quite a number of years, has had a strong relationship to École des Sables. I have been working with a number of generations of students in Brussels who have been out to École des Sables on exchange programmes and who quite frequently introduced experiences and knowledge and

perspectives that they had gained from being in Senegal into the workshops that I was teaching. This was enough to make me intrigued and aware of what was happening there. Alesandra, you knew of the work that I was doing there in Brussels, and Alesandra you've also been teaching at P.A.R.T.S., and you're from Brussels, so I think I understood that when you invited me, the invitation grew from the idea that the kind of work that was being initiated at P.A.R.T.S. was already connected to Senegal and that we could explore it. For me, that was the starting point.

LM: It feels almost as if you are speaking about a conceptual completion happening for you, linking together the embodied and the anecdotal, finding your own relationship to it. That's interesting in terms of lineages, and how it felt to move from a cognitive understanding, or perhaps the understanding of somebody else's physical experience through their body, and into yours through being there ... that sense of 'being with-ness'.

JB: Yeah. The complicated thing is that the work that I do at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, although ostensibly it's called Choreographic Workshop, the fundamental question is always 'is choreography useful?', and if it is useful, when is it useful? And more importantly, when is it not useful? It felt very important that the same question was addressed to the students in Senegal, particularly because the kind of choreographic practice I come from is a Western European–North American choreographic practice, and you don't have to spend long with the students in Senegal, certainly the group that I was working with, to discover that it's very important for them, individually and as a group, I think, to question the lineage of dance and choreographic practice coming from Europe and North America. That doesn't mean rejecting it outright, but it does mean occupying a questioning, or healthily sceptical position. I absolutely loved that and I asked Alesandra

if we could facilitate the workshops together, in a sense to continue a conversation about questioning that we've been having as individual artists.

LM: And how did that facilitation feel for you, Alesandra? Taking the conversation that you've been having as individual artists and moving it into a pedagogic space?

AS: Well, I think the first thing that I felt really important was the fact that Jonathan wanted this conversation to be open, because he was well aware that he was coming into. His coming into École des Sables to work with African dancers, and his position in regard to them, I found that very interesting because it's very rare to find this. When you look at all the different organizations we invite teachers from, in Europe or the West ... they can sometimes come with this sense of 'I've got the truth and you are now going to listen to what I'm going to tell you'. A lot of dancers who have trained, you know, in my generation have had this vision, have had this kind of training where they are told '*that's contemporary dance*'. You only see a kind of contemporary dance that was really ... well, it didn't make sense on the continent of Africa because they had been schooled by a certain type of choreographer or teacher who knew 'the truth'. So, I really found it really interesting when Jonathan said we should work together and have a conversation *with* the students, and *really* have this conversation with them and allow space for their voices. I think that was also a challenge for the students because they didn't know what to do at first. First of all, I was there in the space, and they are used to one teacher, they're not really used to teachers collaborating. Plus I had just become the co-artistic director, so they knew me as a teacher but they didn't yet know me as the co-artistic director. So, I'm in the space and I'm speaking, and I'm there with Jonathan, and we are both leaving an open floor for them to explore these questions. But they've not really been used to this

sort of exploration. I think it was very interesting, and it opened up a lot of doors. There were lots of 'a-ha' moments. I think in the beginning there was some resistance, you know? People didn't really want to give in, but then they started understanding what was happening and, I guess, opening up to the possibilities of having a conversation, recognizing that the questions that emerged had to be answered by them, not by us.

LM: So, you all stepped together into uncertainty. I'm interested in these moments of recognition, that they had to answer the question that they weren't going to be provided with the answers. How did that work its way out? And I know, that, that's such an open question.

JB: The two things that kept emerging were to do with whether techniques of making would help or prevent communication to an audience. The moments when there was a sudden recognition of what Alessandra and I were inviting were the moments where somebody had followed a technique or a way of thinking about how to make something that they had expected to turn out in some way, abstract or empty or formal or cold or uninvolved or not reflecting their culture or their identity or where their passion was coming from. And then actually the ways of working seemed to spark ... very strong communication and very strong emotional presence. It was surprising to some of the students. Of course, that's not a discovery unique to a student from Senegal or any other African country, that is a journey that every student anywhere in the world who wants to work with the body and physicality in relation to making something has to discover. While perhaps not unique to dance, it is very strong in dance, because you often begin by working with your own body, so there's a disjunct between what you feel strongly in yourself, that you think the person watching will feel ... but in fact they don't feel, and

the techniques that are only about understanding the gap between your own inner experience and the thing communicated ... if that makes sense?

LM: Mmm. Yes, it does. I spend a lot of time talking to students about the gap between intention and reception, and that slippage in-between what you want to share and what is communicated is cavernous.

I'm curious to follow up on the question that you offered ... is choreography useful? Did you pose that question explicitly, or was it implicit in your negotiation?

AS: The question was asked, and was answered through different ... well answered ... I don't know if it was fully answered by everyone ... but it was definitely explored. I think most of them came out with something ... Some of the students don't plan own making work in the future; some do. When Jonathan came, they still had a period of time to complete the diploma, so a lot has happened afterwards, after reflection. The question was definitely asked and different outcomes have happened. Some are making now, some are not, some are still discovering, and I guess that's what comes out of many of these programmes.

JB: And I think that one of the things that confused the students, Alesandra, about the fact that you and I were collaborating was ... I remember that there was one day they had a meeting without us, and then came and said ... 'but we're very confused because Jonathan watches your technique class in the morning and then you come to his class and then you talk all the time!' [all laugh] Which, apart from being very funny, was ... and I just, I mean I responded by saying 'well actually what, what we're trying to work on is practice, and Alesandra and I have an ongoing practice of conversation that we would like to invite you into'. There's something to experience and learn from that. But more

importantly, in terms of dance, there's this strange binary between dancing and choreography, and often I think in dance institutions they're treated very separately. For me it was a really unusual and interesting experience that Alesandra and I insisted that they were together. And I learned a lot from that, I have to say. I've never had that opportunity, and I hope the students felt they were given the possibility to break down that binary between dancing and choreography because there is really no difference. It's only perceived as a difference because of the way the two things are taught and the way they're both dealt with within culture and so forth. It's quite useful to break it down. When I say choreography may not be useful, it just means dancing may be enough, but of course dancing is choreographic. And that argument works the other way around, and that's particularly important for somebody who wants to work with a particular African dance form, which has built into itself its own choreographic structures which they've embodied so deeply that they might not even be perceived as structures by those dancing them.

But in order to expand the possibilities of those forms in a performance situation, then it's useful to try to catch a glimpse of what's going on and how you might interrogate it differently. It's ongoing work. I think it's really exciting what the future can hold in that sense, in terms of people making contemporary dance in Africa or dance in Africa ... because the word contemporary itself is problematic. Who owns it?

LM: Have these experiences informed the ongoing conversations at École des Sables; is this a conversation that continues?

AS: Mmm ... well, we are starting up again in April or May, so we'll see. But I guess it's a new vision, a new direction. There's this idea of crossing more into intersectionality

that we really want to implement, so I guess we'll see what happens. We were ... this programme that Jonathan and I are speaking about ... I was finishing off something that had been started by someone else. I had initially been invited there as a teacher, so I had my own contribution as a teacher within that space. But in terms of how the programme develops, and trying to implement those ideas, we'll see. It's definitely a plan, but let's see what happens.

JB: I want to say though, Alesandra, that Germaine Acogny, herself, has developed a technique which the students learn, but at the same time, she's been making, working and recently ... which is extraordinary on any kind of choreographic and performative level ... so she herself represents a very non-binary relationship between the act of dancing and the act of making ... so, she's right there.

AS: Yea.

LM: If I may sort of wander a little more with you both, Alesandra you mentioned before about inviting teachers from Europe, and there is a sense that they carry with them 'the truth', and the evidently problematic narratives of evangelizing and colonization and all of those kinds of things that sit there ... I'm curious what ... I don't even know what I'm curious about because my question feels so huge in this moment ... but I think I'm asking how do these conversations travel outwards?

AS: How does it travel outwards in terms of the opposite ... you mean the teachers from the continent?

LM: Yes I think so. Hearing the students have that experience of expecting to be told something because there is the sense that the truth is going to come and is a narrative that is often inscribed in all of our bodies in a variety of ways, but it feels especially

problematic in relationship to European narratives moving towards African nations. I suppose the strategy of sharing the idea of conversation as practice, ~~and the idea of recognizing that know~~, African dance forms have choreographic principles implicit within the technique ...

AS: I mean, already with the students ... with those particular students ... there's always this question of representation. Representation in the sense of aspiration as a maker, as a dancer, even on the continent of Africa. But I'm also speaking for myself as a dancer having evolved in Europe. I would say there's always this thing of representation. Where do I see myself? Who looks like me? Who can I aspire to? Unfortunately, there's a lot of exports in terms of African artists coming to Europe, to America. There are many choreographers, well maybe not many, but a few of them, exporting themselves but then they don't necessarily come back so much to teach on the continent. It's always an economic problem. Economically, it's more interesting to leave because you're going to make money and then you can come back. By inviting teachers who are coming from Europe, again it's a whole economic thing, because they're paid by a European body who allows them to go and teach. People come and will learn for free, but they are under this institutional organization. So, the idea of exporting happens. But it's only for some. For the lucky ones are in a network that usually brings the other teachers from Europe and will take them out into Europe. It's already like a whole network that chooses who and how. You have the few chances of those who manage to leave ... but not necessarily in a network. So, exporting in itself is not always an easy concept, because when teachers come here to teach or share ideas, then dancers leave the continent, which in turn leaves less room for aspiration and representation. That is why the work of Germaine is so

important, because she is living on the continent, even though she's touring everywhere else. She's still here. In a way, this allows people to see her representation ... and her aspiration. She is someone that they can see who is like them, who has travelled but comes back. So, that's already a big thing. And everything has to do with the economy.

So again, this idea of choreography and teaching is all down to economy as well. I've had this conversation a lot with the dancers, about their idea of making the solo and group work and things like that. There's the economy of touring a group. It's cheaper to tour a solo, but I always think making a solo is hard. I encourage students to work with people first, rather than just work by themselves. Yes, economically it's better to make a solo, because there are more chances for some of these international organizations to bring you over and show your work. And that narrative is itself quite problematic in a way.

That's why it is really a mission in a way, with the *École des Sables* and even with my own practice, to be able to offer more representation. To try to also give a sense of ownership to the students and the people that are there to create. To make things happen and to remember that they can shift or move and collaborate. And it's important to expose them to artists who might not just want an economic exchange, but an artistic exchange, to find ways to create healthier exchanges.

JB: And the students are very aware of these problems, because they came up very quickly in the two weeks that I spent with them. We spent a lot of time discussing those things because for many of them, it impacted upon what kind of work they thought they could make. There was a sense from them that there was a certain kind of performance that would be more successful within Europe, and that may not be what they wanted to

make. I found that level of awareness to be very encouraging, and at the same time, I think I saw moments where a more playful attitude emerged parallel to those problems. It feels to me that given École des Sables is, on the one hand, a kind of radical new institution and, on the other hand, probably one of the most important contemporary dance institutions in the world right now. While those problems are not going to be solved or addressed rapidly, there is nonetheless a space for those problems to be questioned and addressed. The level of thinking, questioning and discussing, and application and making from that generation of students I worked with this year, I thought was astonishing really.

LM: Alesandra, the idea of the network that you alluded to, how do we continue to build an appetite for the kinds of transcontinental conversations that might shift the direction of travel, especially in the context of wider economic drivers?

AS: It's ... I think we have to re-centre things and destabilize the hierarchy of dance. I think part of this is shifting the idea that, you know, for a lot of people training in Africa, it's kind of a secondary thing. Even people who are, for example, from the diaspora would rather go and train in New York. They wouldn't go to Senegal to train, because there's more of a prestige in training in New York than there is in training in Senegal. It's only very recently that Germaine managed to bring a majority of diaspora students together in one workshop. I think re-centring and de-centring, moving away from the idea that certain types of dance are for certain places, is the only way we'll be able to have these exchanges, because it means that we are ~~not~~ only looking at certain forms and not others. And that's a big thing ... in the UK I think it's an even bigger issue, and I've been speaking to Jonathan about this. When I teach at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, I rarely get

questioned what I'm teaching. I really rarely get questions like 'oh but where is this from' or, you know, 'but this is African-based dance, why are you teaching us this?' And these questions I get them in the UK, which is quite interesting. And you feel it, you know? When people feel like 'oh, I'm doing this thing, but it's not really part of me' ... you know it. I think there is something about being in the institution, and in the attitude or the vision about how we see things that has to be shifted. I think that will help.

JB: It has to shift everywhere; actually, I think the experience of *École des Sables* can help other places to shift. Especially away from this kind of narrow art-historic timeline and towards recognizing a multiplicity of ways of doing and expressing, seeing them as equally valid. There is a lot that can be gifted from that experience.

AS: Ultimately, I guess it's about continuing to do what has been started. De-centring and shifting. In the same way we ask that question about choreography ... it's exactly that ... it's having the conversation and questioning things.

Alesandra Seutin, Jonathan Burrows and Lee Miller have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.