THE PATH TO INTEGRATION THROUGH DANCE

Stephanie Bangoura combines traditional African music with contemporary dance theater. Her work focuses on the function of rituals, integration through dance, and how cultural boundaries can be broken down.

AN ARTICLE BY SOPHIE LAURA MARTIN

Education and Experience Abroad



Stephanie Bangoura

I studied Performance Art in Brazil, held a scholarship, and completed my Master's degree at the State University for Dance and Theater there, focusing on contemporary dance rituals. I always felt at home in Brazil, with all its different identities. Brazil is in a constant process of finding its identity, as there are diverse influences in the country. From indigenous people to Arabs, Africans, and Europeans, all ethnicities are represented here.

I lived and worked in a part of Brazil where about 80 percent of the population is Black. They, too, are searching for their roots —just like me. I always had great difficulty with just "being German," and have always looked for the different sides of cultures, simply to be able to fully express myself. Altogether, I spent seven years in Brazil. And I lived in Senegal for two years specifically to study West African dances. Then I was in New York for a year, Havana, and later Paris. In Paris, I also met my Senegalese dancer, musician, husband, and the father of my daughter.

> ***"In addition to this Master's, I also completed training in therapy. Afterwards, I spent six years intensely exploring the topic of self-awareness."***

I was permanently employed at the Richard Strauss Conservatory in Munich for ten years. My focus was on creative dance. Dance improvisation was always my thing; here I can incorporate various influences. But I always had this longing inside me. I noticed that when I am somewhere else, in a foreign country, in a different culture with a different language, I can live out even more parts of my personality. And in Africa especially, you are accepted just as you are; I felt very welcome in this culture.

At Home All Over the World

So I have roots everywhere, I feel at home everywhere. In all these different cultures, parts of me light up that only emerge in that one specific country, but nowhere else. In Africa, for example, I experience and feel myself completely differently than in Brazil. And it is always about the people and the relationships, about the humor, the language, all these little peculiarities. I experience these aspects very strongly through my body. When I practice Capoeira, I am in a different swing than when I dance the Sabar from Senegal.
I find this richness incredibly wonderful. It is always about uniting the different identities. Dancing is a fantastic medium for this. I always try to live my different identities equally, letting them communicate with each other. It is also of great importance that they get to know each other, that they meet. Because all personalities are there, they want to be seen. This approach allows me to be at peace with myself and feel at home all over the world.

The Association Tanz der Kulturen e.V.

At the beginning of 2018, I founded my association "Tanz der Kulturen" (Dance of Cultures). We do many projects with various cooperation partners, for example with "Fördern und Wohnen" or with "Political Bodies" at Kampnagel here in Hamburg. In Frankfurt, we work with the organization "ÜberBrücken," which specializes in artistic integration projects with refugees.

THE BANGOURA GROUP

Part of the association is the Bangoura Group. This music group combines dance theater with live music. In doing so, we enter into a dialogue with the audience, involving them in our performance. We play traditional African instruments. These are very complex, and there are only a few people who truly master these instruments at all. For example, we have the Balafon, a kind of African xylophone that sounds very earthy.

Then we have the Kora, an African string instrument. The Kora is often used for solo performances, but our band has integrated it into our musical pieces. Otherwise, we attach great importance to ensuring our music isn't too drum-heavy and that we work a lot with melodies, which is more in line with European listening habits.

Improvisation is at the Forefront

Our music is complemented by a jazz singer. It is also important to us not to sing only in African languages, because our audience wouldn't understand it. So we work with English, French, or German vocals. We offer a mixture of different languages to underscore the universal character.
And improvisation is at the forefront for us. The Bangoura Group was founded in 2015, and our musicians come from very different cultural backgrounds. We bring fusion music to the stage, which often isn't easy, because it always requires a human "fusion," where communication, especially verbal communication, is very important. So how can this "fusion" ultimately work? I sought help from an internationally renowned Brazilian music arranger who has done nothing else his entire life. He also works with people who cannot read sheet music. And we rely on rituals.

The Use of Rituals

In my work, I always refer back to the ritual aspect. The transition from your home, for example, to work or —in my case—to dance class, results in an identity shift. On the one hand, you are private within your own four walls, then you put on your dance clothes and now you are a dancer.
Executing this, the realization that everyday life is now laid aside and we are entering a new identity, is part of the ritual. Here I always strive for a deceleration and a conscious feeling of this transformation.
The three phases of the ritual are separation from everyday life, experiencing a journey, and reintegration back into everyday life. Designing this consciously, especially in dance and music, is what I'm all about. Awareness-building is in focus, but it is always also about community-building. I was able to learn intensely what this means in concrete terms in African cultures. Music and dancing are a constant dialogue. It is also about hearing: listening to one another, but also being heard, about perception. All of these are basic human needs.

Finding Perspectives

And we offer workshops, especially for refugee children and young people. This is primarily about reducing aggression or creatively transforming it. This happens through dancing and music; the drum is particularly suited for this. I believe that African culture offers an optimal outlet for releasing aggression. We get the kids out of the refugee accommodations. It is not good if they just sit inside all day in front of the TV.

People simply need more than just a roof over their heads and something to eat. It is one of our tasks to invite the children to do something. We must think seriously about this, otherwise, we create the next catastrophes. These young people can slide into drugs, unemployment, and welfare. They need to be seen, appreciated, and to build stable relationships. But unfortunately, the bureaucratic effort is a problem here.

To carry out a five-day project requires an immense amount of work, especially to generate the necessary funds, and it often takes months before such a project is even approved. We don't need this bureaucracy; it's unnecessary. What we need are social workers; artists need pedagogical training. Alternatively, of course, one can work in tandems—an artist and an educator team up, engage in the necessary professional dialogue, take time for team meetings, and work uniformly. However, far too little attention is paid to this in calls for proposals.

Integration through Music

The word integration has various meanings for me. On the one hand, there is cultural integration. But I want to broaden this concept. Namely, I want to address the integration of our different inner personalities. This includes our shadow sides, precisely the sides we don't like to look at or show.

> ***"I understand dance work as integration work. Including this entire spectrum of different feelings that we all simply have—that is what I work with."***

We then react with distractions, with consumption, or even with medications like antidepressants, simply to avoid showing the aggressive or phlegmatic side. Destructive, traumatic feelings are also allowed to be there, to be expressed. Unfortunately, it is culturally conditioned that such feelings are rather suppressed and repressed.

This creates illnesses. Dance, art, and music offer an excellent opportunity to allow these emotions. In my sessions, there is a lot of crying and screaming; unpopular feelings like anger, grief, fear, shame, and insecurity are given space and allowed to be lived out.
We unfortunately live in a society of shame, sin, and guilt, shaped by our Christian worldview. In dance, we can gently show ourselves; everything is allowed, even the negative feelings. And everything happens voluntarily, without pressure. At the end of every session, I take a lot of time for a closing circle; we exchange thoughts about what we experienced, share our experiences. We look at where there are commonalities, but also consider the differences.

Experiencing Differences and Commonalities

For me, that is also integration: experiencing the differences and commonalities in this personal, deep aspect. Because the deeper we go into the personality, the more commonalities there are. The differences are often only superficial. When we go deeper, it is always about recognition, appreciation, and love. All these things can be wonderfully internalized with music and dance.
Integration takes place on different levels, for as a mystic, I know that inner processes are directly reflected in the external. African dance is based on myths. In dancing, we have the opportunity to live out our various personality parts—for example, the fighter in us, or the idler, the seductress, and the fool—and thereby integrate them. Integrating also means being seen, expressing oneself creatively, and valuing oneself.

Why African Dance of All Things?

I have often asked myself why I chose African music and culture of all things. When I took my first dance class with Africans, it was suddenly said: *Elle danse fort* – meaning: she dances strong. And African dance is completely different; it is much about the visibility of energy in the dancing itself, about dialogue, and not so much about the external form. And it is spontaneous, improvised. This very improvisation is the basic element of African dance, not the imitation of a choreography.

The Dance Training & The Book

This dance training takes place over seven weekends. Each weekend we dedicate ourselves to a theme based on African myths, enlivened by the attitude of Gestalt therapy. I am currently writing a textbook for my training. This book describes the basic principles of African dance, intensely focusing on rituals, repetition, and improvisation.

Learn more at: www.afrikanischer-tanz.de