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Adapting to digital dance in Kenya

Charlie Ely is a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds, exploring the emerging field of contemporary dance in East Africa.

In July 2021, she interviewed Kenyan dance artists Brian Oloo, Pretty Lodei and Diana Odiambo about their experiences adapting to the covid-19 pandemic. In particular, how with a month to go until Aduwa Festival, Kisumu's first international contemporary dance festival, they were forced to take it online due to a new curfew across the Western Kenya region.

Charlie Ely

How would you characterise the contemporary dance and dance theatre scene in Kisumu?

Brian Oloo

It's been a good solid 10 years now since I was introduced to contemporary dance in Kisumu, that was the first time that it was introduced with YAWA (Youth Accosted With Arts).¹

Diana Odiambo

It's becoming more and more popular, people are starting to embrace it, but we're not there yet.

Brian Oloo

Contemporary dance is mostly heard of in Kisumu and Nairobi. So, we've not reached the further ends of the country. Even in Kisumu, we don't have enough contemporary dancers.

Charlie Ely

What have been the biggest challenges for you, for contemporary dancers in general in Kisumu, brought on by Covid-19?

Diana Odiambo

With the Covid regulations, you have to halt your projects because of the risk of infecting others. [...] You can no longer go and perform like you used to, hold an event, have many people, it's either you go virtual or have a smaller number of people.

Pretty Lodei

We've not even been able to train regularly the way we do, because all of us are facing a challenge of money, and we're not able to transport ourselves to the space.

Diana Odiambo

It was worse in the beginning [...]. Because the country just shut down like that, you were not prepared. 2020 was more challenging than 2021, when things are a bit opening up, [...] at least you can go and perform even if the numbers, the audience, are not the same.

Pretty Lodei

Plus the lockdowns and -

Brian Oloo

¹ *The first contemporary dance groups in Kenya were Nairobi-based companies Dance Into Space (1996) and Gaara Company (1997).*

Staying home doing nothing for two months! Going from all these things that you're doing to nothing, in terms of income, in terms of activity, or engagement in various things. [...] You don't know what's coming next.

Charlie Ely

Over time, are there some small positive things that you think have come out of it?

Pretty Loden

Spending time with my family and more time with these guys.

Diana Odiambo

Yes, because before Covid Brian will have a project somewhere else, Pretty will have a project somewhere else, so maybe we will just meet once in a while. So we came up with ideas, with better projects that are futuristic, [...] thinking of projects that can last with this era of Covid. [...] We were even able to come up with the festival because of Covid.

Charlie Ely

It gave you a bit more time -

Diana Odiambo

Yes, to work on it and to have one or two things put in order.

Brian Oloo

It's also the first time that I got to engage in projects virtually. It got me to think about working virtually, even after Covid: you can create performances without having to have people there, you just communicate, can you do this, let me do this, then when you're reaching the space, you make it better. So it's sort of created a new thing.

Charlie Ely

Brian, as the festival director, can you describe your original idea and plan for Aduwa Festival?

Brian Oloo

Originally, Aduwa Festival was supposed to be a live event [...] we wanted to have dancers from different places come and exchange ideas.² [...] It was supposed to be one week where Monday to Thursday dancers meet to exchange ideas, have workshops, then a dress rehearsal on the Friday, and then Saturday is the day of the performances.

Charlie Ely

There's many different ways that people can do events virtually. How did you reach the decision to do it in the way you have, what platform are you using, is it live stream, etc.?

Brian Oloo

We are going to be streaming live from our Facebook page and YouTube channel. We're using Facebook because [...] it's the platform that most people are using in Kenya and in East Africa. [...] We want to be able to have as many people as possible to watch the event, that is a part of the exchange we're having with the audience. They get to see our work and it's all for free.[...] It's going to be on

² The festival was due to include artists from across Kenya, along with Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Saturday afternoon, with performances lined up from 3-6pm. There's going to be some discussions in between, conversations with some of the creators.

Charlie Ely

Tell us a little about your pieces, and how this decision, or this being forced, to go online - how did it affect your choreography?

Brian Oloo

Table of Silence - you can call it a debate or an argument or an altercation [...] between two people, in this case, a woman and a man. It's this sort of thing that goes on and on, you argue, you don't argue, you disagree, and you agree, and you find a common place. Even in choreography, you find a common place. But there's lots of time when we are going against each other, which is sort of our normal day today, whoever we relate to. That's what creates a relationship, that we can communicate, we can talk and we can argue but we can still be together. [...] There's this some contemporary dance to it, some Afro-fusion, there's also a bit of hip hop in it. There's lot of body contact, contact movement, and a lot of fusion. [...] The table is where you have your conversations.

Pretty Lodeni

Where we try to get together, but again it's kind of separating us. Because we come to the table, we have the movement on the table and under and on the side of the table. [...] It felt a bit different because for the live audience it's a continuous choreography, without stopping and without having to get criticism from people(!) [...] At the venue where we were supposed to do the performance, we would have been a bit limited because the stage, it was not so big. So that will have caused us to get a smaller table, which also would be a challenge for our moves and our choreography. So I think the video was good for us, because [...] we didn't have any limits.

Diana Odiambo

A Thin Line is a solo, it's basically about normal life routines. You have a thin line between love and hate, a thin line between black and white, a thin line between health and sickness. [...] So *A Thin Line* is to show anything can change anytime [...] The prop I'm having is a cloth, which has been folded, it's a symbol of the thin line.

Brian Oloo

The cloth also signifies all the boundaries that are put on you by society, and you break out of this box, and you find more of yourself, [...] she is more stable when she's outside the cloth. [...] Later in the piece, we see her moving around with the cloth and she's controlling it and taking everywhere, that's basically signifying that you can take everyone's view and make it into something else. To finish the piece, she gets to wear this cloth, showing that you're owning everything that you are, and you're owning everything that comes your way.

Diana Odiambo

For that piece, I think the advantage is it can be done virtual and live. The main thing that is challenging is the recording - with the stops. Because we have to do takes and takes. [...]

It was outside – [...] outside I get more space and more air to breathe, and I breathe more than when I am confined, and you see everyone watching you! So, when I'm outside and recording, if I'm too tense, I get to relax and do my thing.

But when you're performing live, [...] it's just one time like that, you give it your best shot. The advantage of the virtual is, if you feel like a part is not ok, you can do it over and over again.

Charlie Ely

You had several different camera angles and people filming – how was that?

Diana Odihambo

At some point, it was distracting because you want to move, and then again, you don't want to get out of frame. It was challenging, but the more we recorded, the more it got better.

Charlie Ely

Are there any thoughts you have for the editing already?

Brian Oloo

We don't want to lose the concept of the piece. [...] I personally I don't like when it's flickering and changing - I like it when it's smooth and you invite someone in and they get to follow the story. [...] I feel like the people who will watch, they will also feel like this was meant for a live performance.

Pretty Lodeeni

Our intention is to make them feel like they're really watching it live, at that moment.

Charlie Ely

How do you feel generally about dance on film, particularly over the last year?

Diana Odihambo

For me, I think dance is more interesting when it's live [...] when you get to have everything raw and people get to enjoy it how it is, rather than when you're recording, it's kind of controlled.

Brian Oloo

I've never fancied dancing on camera, but I'm starting to love it!

Charlie Ely

You did a big dance film last year -

Brian Oloo

The Rite of Spring.³ Actually, that was also meant for a live audience, but because of COVID, they had to restrict all travel and all performances, and we had to do Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring* at the beach. It was an interesting experience, and I think we should do that more.

Charlie Ely

What do you think you will take from the experience of doing Aduwa Festival into your future work?

Brian Oloo

I think there's a lot we can take – to do with how we prepare for quick responses, how we prepare for whenever we need to change and react to changes without our environment.

³ Oloo is one of the dancers in the film *Dancing at Dusk: A Moment with Pina Bausch's The Rite of Spring*. Directed by Florian Heinzen-Ziob, Pina Bausch Foundation, Ecole des Sables and Sadler's Wells, 2020.

Diana Odihambo

I think the virtue of a virtual performance is you reach a wider audience. [...] If there's winter, you don't have to go out, freeze to go to a theatre to watch something, but you just sit at your house, switch on the internet and you do your own thing! [...] Also, with this pandemic, you can have an audition, but it's in another country. So someone will want to see the performances you've done before. So you compile them and you're able to send - that's another advantage of having filmed performances.