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| Acogny, Germaine (1944--) |
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| In a career that has spanned over forty years, Germaine Acogny has contributed to Modernism in dance by merging culturally situated West African dances from Senegal and Benin with Western dance forms such as Graham technique and classical ballet to create a new African dance aesthetic. Her work emerged from an African postcolonial framework, and her pedagogy codified a modernist Africanist technique. |
| Summary In a career that has spanned over forty years, Germaine Acogny has contributed to Modernism in dance by merging culturally situated West African dances from Senegal and Benin with Western dance forms such as Graham technique and classical ballet to create a new African dance aesthetic. Her work emerged from an African postcolonial framework, and her pedagogy codified a modernist Africanist technique. In the 1960s when African dance was viewed by some Western audiences as primitive and timeless, Acogny advocated the necessity of viewing African dance as evolving and changing. Senegal’s first president, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and French choreographer Maurice Béjart appointed Acogny director of the Senegal-based *Mudra Afrique* that trained African-based choreographers and teachers. Acogny has taught and performed globally and is the founder of *École de Sables* (School of Sands), a training, residency, and research centre in Senegal. She also founded the *Jant-Bi* (The Sun) Company in 1996. She is known as ‘Mama Acogny’ because she has mentored numerous young dancers and choreographers in Africa and globally. She also has been called one of the founders of contemporary African dance. *Faagala* (2003) is a notable touring work, which addressed the Rwandan genocide. It was a choreographic collaboration between *Jant Bi* and Japan’s Kota Yamasaki in 2004. Early Training and Career Germaine Acogny, granddaughter of a Yoruba priestess, was born in Benin in 1944. She grew up in Senegal, attended convent school in Dakar, and studied at the Simon Siegel School in Paris. Her early training was defined by the dances she learned in Benin and Senegal and her study with dance modernists in Paris. In 1965, with a diploma in harmonic gymnastics, she returned to Senegal, where she met the American modern dance choreographer, Katherine Dunham. In 1972 Acogny was appointed Head of the Dance Division at Senegal’s first National Arts Institute. During this time she went to Burkina Faso on an exchange with choreographers Irene Tassembedo and Alassane Congo and to New York to study at the Alvin Ailey School. President Senghor and Maurice Béjart appointed Acogny to head *Mudra Afrique* in 1977. Dancers came from many African countries to learn ballet, modern, and African dance idioms. She worked with Maurice Béjart when she was director of *Mudra Afrique* in Dakar from 1977­–1982 and with his company in Brussels from 1982–1985. The aim of her school in Africa was to train dancers to absorb the steps and values of other dance forms in order to generate a new kind of African dance. The dancers who studied at *Mudra Afrique* established new training programs when they returned to their home countries throughout West and Central Africa. Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Like many other modernists, Acogny often used hybridity as a creative strategy. Acogny’s pedagogy and choreography, for instance, drew from a combination of movement practices and the embodied experiences of living in the culture where the dances were practiced. The result was an African dance idiom that paid respect to the diversity of each region’s dance customs and created a codified technique that united and integrated them. The technique incorporated traditional dances from West African and Western dance forms with a concentration on spinal undulation and vibration and constant communication between the musicians and dancers. Acogny’s technique drew from images in nature and surrounding cultural environments with titles of movement sequences such as the *Baobab Tree, Arched Bow*, and *The Passenger*.  Her work also drew on her knowledge of other art forms and sometimes contained implicit political content to create dances that carefully layered movement with cultural commentary. For instance, *Femme Noire*, her first choreography, premiered at Senegal’s National Theatre Daniel Sorano in June 1972. The theme of this work was ‘black womanhood,’ as expressed in a similarly titled poem by Senegal’s first president and co-founder of Negritude, Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was a modernist poet, politician, and founder of the first Pan African Arts Festival.  While many European and North American modernists rejected tradition, Acogny translated tradition. She did not want to limit African dance to authentic, non-evolving ‘black’ dance. Instead, she constructed an ongoing inquiry into African dance, treating tradition as perpetually self-renewing, and in turn she began to codify a pan-African aesthetic. She addressed the importance of contextualizing the socio-cultural present with traditional dance forms. So although her work was deeply rooted in popular traditions, it was not a return to the past. Legacy In 1968, Acogny opened an African Dance School behind her home in Dakar. In 1998, she established *École de Sables* in Toubab Dialaw Senegal, which offered residency space, dance workshops for local and international dancers, and a home base for the all male company *Jant-Bi*. Acogny and *Jant Bi* have collaborated on numerous choreographic works with other artists, such as Susane Linke, Kota Yamasaki, Jawole Zollar/Urban Bush Women, and her son Patrick Acogny. List of Performance Works: *Sahel* (1987)  *Ye'ou* (1988)  *Afrique, Ce Corps Memorable* (1989)  *Yewa, Eau Sublime* (1994)  *Z (*1995)  *Tchourai* (2001)  *Fagaala (*2003)  *Waxtaan (*2006)  *Scales of Memory (*2007)  *Songook Yaakaar (*2010)  Photos: I would like to include Antoine Tempe’s photographs. He is available to send you several beautiful photos of Acogny. His email is [Antoine@antoinetempe.com](mailto:Antoine@antoinetempe.com)  His website is: http://antoinetempe.com/ |
| Further reading:  (Acogny)  (Foster)  (Mackenzie)  (Frosch) |