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| Dafora, Asadata (1890-1965) |
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| Multidisciplinary artist Asadata Dafora (also known as Austin Asadata Dafora Horton) was widely known for his contributions to dance as well as the propagation of African drumming and cultural aesthetics across the United States. As a composer, librettist, singer, choreographer, and dancer, Dafora built a formidable career during the Great Depression, creating full-length operatic works using African drumming, instrumentation, dance styles, and cultural themes. His groundbreaking work *Kykunkor* (1934), based on Mende folklore, employed authentic African dance, music, language and a predominantly African-born cast and ran for months to increasingly larger audiences in New York City. In 1960 he returned to Sierra Leone to serve as Director of Culture, and after his return to the U.S. two years later, he turned over leadership of his company to Esther Rolle. As one of the first artists to introduce authentic African dance and music to American audiences, Dafora became a pioneer of Black concert dance. |
| Summary  Multidisciplinary artist Asadata Dafora (also known as Austin Asadata Dafora Horton) was widely known for his contributions to dance as well as the propagation of African drumming and cultural aesthetics across the United States. As a composer, librettist, singer, choreographer, and dancer, Dafora built a formidable career during the Great Depression, creating full-length operatic works using African drumming, instrumentation, dance styles, and cultural themes. His groundbreaking work *Kykunkor* (1934), based on Mende folklore, employed authentic African dance, music, language and a predominantly African-born cast and ran for months to increasingly larger audiences in New York City. In 1960 he returned to Sierra Leone to serve as Director of Culture, and after his return to the U.S. two years later, he turned over leadership of his company to Esther Rolle. As one of the first artists to introduce authentic African dance and music to American audiences, Dafora became a pioneer of Black concert dance.  File: Kykunkor.jpg  Figure Asadata Dafora in *Kykunkor* (1934)  Source: Photo by Eileen Darby. http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures/dafora572.jpg Training and Early Career Dafora’s early education began at the Wesleyan School in Freetown, Sierra Leone. While not much is known about Dafora’s training as an artist, it is widely reported that he spoke many African dialects in addition to French, Italian, and German. From 1910 to 1912 he studied at La Scala in Milan and performed in Verdi’s *Aida* and Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* on tour across Europe. He also coordinated a group of African dancers, at the suggestion of a German concert promoter. Dafora was aptly grounded in European classical music before he ended his studies to serve in the British Army during the First World War. Major contributions to the Field and to Modernism In 1929 Dafora left Europe and travelled to New York City, initially to pursue a career as a musician. On January 26 1931, he hosted his first vocal concert at Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on 137th Street in Harlem. In 1933 the lyric tenor began to focus more acutely on bringing African cultural expression to the stage, beginning with the presentation of ‘Something New in New York – A Night in Africa,’ an event hosted by the newly minted Asadata African Opera & Dramatic Company at the Little Theatre of the Harlem YMCA on April 13, 1933. This event included excerpts from *Zoonga*, an African opera that Dafora had begun working on, blending African music and dance with western theatrical traditions. After connecting with fellow African immigrants at the National African Union Social Club, Dafora established Shologa Oloba, an all-male African dance company intended to portray African art and cultural themes in performance. In 1933, Shologa Oloba premiered Dafora’s *Zoonga*, a dance opera, at the Communist Party Bazaar in New York City’s Madison Square Garden. Many members of Shologa Oloba later performed with the Federal Theatre African Dance Troupe, sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) after 1935. Importantly, the African Dance Troupe, as members of the WPA’s Negro Unit, performed in the celebrated ‘Haitian’ *Macbeth*, (also known as the ‘Voodoo *Macbeth*,’) produced by the Federal Theatre Project and directed by Orson Welles; in the production, Dafora himself performed the ‘voodoo’ chants.  Building on his early education in Freetown, Dafora is considered among the first to stage African ritual in a western-style production. Begun in 1931 and completed in 1934, Dafora’s *Kykunkor* was produced at the Little Theater on West 44th Street in New York City after having its premiere at the Unity Theatre on East 23rd Street in May of that year. The opera portrayed the story of a bridegroom, Bokari, played by Dafora. In the opera, Bokari is betrothed to Musu Esami and later cursed by a witch at the behest of one of Musu Esami’s scorned lovers. Kykunkor presented African cultural material adapted for the proscenium stage and blended traditional dance rituals with theatrical elements derived from opera; it made use of at least three African languages and ran for some sixty-five performances across New York City. Notably, Dafora himself served as composer, librettist, choreographer and director in addition to leading man in the work. Under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project, Dafora worked with Nigerian-born Momodu Johnson and Norman Coker in developing and producing *Bassa Moona* (1936), a work that resembled *Kykunkor* in style and was presented by the Federal Theatre Project’s African Unit. Johnson and Coker got their start as members of Shologa Oloba. In addition to *Zoonga* and *Kykunkor*, Dafora created another African dance opera, *Zunguru* (1938), subsequently restaged by Esther Rolle in 1940 and 1958.  In 1937 Dafora’s work was featured as the first half of an evening of concert dance at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association on 92nd Street entitled ‘Negro Dance Evening’. Co-directed by Edna Guy and Alison Burroughs, the evening was broken into two parts: the first half, ‘Africa,’ featured Dafora’s music and choreography. The second half of the evening featured performances by Katherine Dunham, showcasing the dances of Haiti, and Talley Beatty. In 1943 Dafora staged and danced in the African Dance Festival at Carnegie Hall, a performance that helped foster a keen interest in African aesthetics in American dance performance on the part of dance critics and writers, including Edwin Denby.[[1]](#endnote-1) Dafora was responsible for the committee that produced the evening, which hosted dignitaries including Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator who served as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s unofficial ‘Black Cabinet,’ and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.  The African Academy of Arts and Sciences had organized the 1943 concert and engaged Dafora’s company again for the second African Dance festival at Carnegie Hall in 1945. These performances showcased musical collaborations between Dafora and jazz artists Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie, leading scholars to argue for the impact of Dafora’s dancing, accompanied by African and Cuban drummers, on the emergent bebop of Gillespie and Parker.[[2]](#endnote-2) During the 1940s, Dafora’s company toured the U.S., supported by historically Black colleges and universities including Fisk University, Howard University, and Hampton Institute. For a Festival of Music and Fine Arts at Fisk, held in April 1943, Dafora’s dances were featured alongside seminars, concerts, film screenings, and art exhibitions of Latin American and African culture as well as scholarly papers on race and diasporic African history. The festival at Fisk highlighted two of Dafora’s works, *Primitive Conga* and *Rhumba*. This event was the forerunner to a similar performance at the USO Arena Auditorium in Norfolk, Virginia, in December 1945. This performance featured ‘African Dance and Modern Rhythms’ with Dafora’s Festival at Battalakor on the first half of the program, entitled ‘Africa.’ The program also featured performances of jazz music and stride piano by Lucky Roberts. Legacy Dafora’s lifelong commitment was to expose audiences to African art and music as well as to encourage patronage by people of the African diaspora, particularly in the United States. Asadata Dafora is credited as one of the forerunners of dance-drama, creating works that integrated narrative, song, and dance. Dafora’s presentations of African dance and instrumental and vocal music are among the earliest performances of Black concert dance considered a cross-over success. Dafora’s work influenced the artistic careers of Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, Charles Moore, and others. Throughout the 1970s, Esther Rolle and Zebedee Collins restaged Dafora’s works, including solos, for the Charles Moore Dance Company. More recently, Moore’s widow Ella Thompson Moore restaged Dafora’s early solo *Awassa Astrige* (*Ostrich*, 1932) for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, demonstrating the enduring vitality and significance of his work.  File: AwassaAstrige.jpg  Figure Ailey dancer Antonio Douthit-Boyd in Dafora's 1932 solo *Awassa Astrige* (*Ostrich*).  Source: Photos by Andrea Mohin for the *New York Times*. http://static01.nyt.com/images/2014/06/16/arts/16AILEY/ailey-articleLarge.jpg Selected Works: *Awassa Astrige* (Ostrich, 1932)  *Zoonga* (1933)  *Kykunkor* (1934)  *Zunguru* (1938)  *Primitive Congo* (1943)  *Rumba* (1943)  *The Shingandi* (1945)  *Festival at Battalakor* (1945)  *A Tale of Old Africa* (1946)  *Batanga* (1949)  *The Valley of the Echo* (1957)  *Afra Ghan Jazz* (1959) |
| Further reading:  (Emery)  (Heard)  (Long)  (Needham)  (Perpener) |

1. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 183-86. The review, titled ‘Asadata Dafora’, originally appeared on 19 December 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J. Stewart, ‘No Boundary Line to Art: Be-Bop as Afro-Modernist Discourse,’ *American Music* 29: 3 (Fall 2011): 332-52. D. Garcia D., ‘We Both Speak African: A Dialogic Study of Afro-Cuban Jazz,’ *Journal of the Society for American Music* 5:2 (2011): 195-233. Both essays quote Gillespie: ‘Through that experience [performing on the African Academy concert] Charlie Parker and I found the connection between Afro-Cuban and African music and discovered the identity of our music with theirs.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)