**Pomare, Eleo (b. 20 October 1937, Cartagena, Colombia; d. 8 August 2008, New York, NY)**

**Summary**

Eleo Pomare was a dancer, choreographer, educator, and social activist who spent more than five decades contributing to the development of modern dance. As a teenager, he enrolled in the High School of Performing Arts in New York and formed a fledgling dance company while he was a student. After graduating, he expanded his group and presented his first major concert at the Ninety-Second Street Y in 1959, a significant venue for emerging talent. In 1967, under the auspices of the Harlem Cultural Council, he co-founded the Dancemobile along with one of his dancers, Carole Y. Johnson. Together they began to produce outdoor summer dance concerts in New York City and surrounding areas. Focused on low-income, urbanneighborhoods, the project presented the companies of emerging African-American dance artists for more than two decades. From the late 1960s through the 1990s Pomare’s company toured the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, performing a repertoire of his choreography, which was based on diverse subject matter. Critics often singled out Pomare for his dancesthat used thematic material from African-American culture and history to create acerbic commentaries on race in America. Consequently, he was labeled “the angry black man” of American modern dance.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, thesources from which he drew his dance subject matter ranged widely—from the plays of William Shakespeare and Federico García Lorca, to the life of Evita Perón, to the paintings of Edward Hopper.

**Training and Background**

During his early childhood, Pomare lived in Colombia and in Panama, but he moved to New York City to live with relatives at the age of ten.Pomare received his earliest dance training at an after-school community center program. He entered the High School of Performing Arts with the intention of training for a career in acting, but soon gravitated toward the dance program, where his teachers included José Limón and Louis Horst. Horst mentored the young dancer as he created *Cantos for a Monastery* (1958), his first solo work and one that remained in his repertoire throughout his career. In 1961, Pomare received a John Hay Whitney Fellowship to study in Essen, Germany with one of Europe’s seminal modern dancers, Kurt Jooss. He had a rocky relationship with Jooss, and he later spoke of being dismissed from the school because of his independent spirit and choreographic aspirations. He then relocated to Amsterdam along with several of his fellow dancers to form a company that performed throughout Holland as well as in Sweden, Germany, and Norway. During the same years, 1961 through 1964, he held teaching positions at the National Ballet and the Scapino Ballet in Holland, the University of Stockholm, the Royal Danish Ballet and Music Festival, and the Kirkenaer Ballet School in Oslo.

In 1963, at the urging of a friend and fellow expatriate, the novelist and essayist James Baldwin, he returned briefly to the United States. The occasion was the March on Washington that was led by Martin Luther King. Pomare later cited this as the pivotal moment that convinced him he needed to be in the U.S. so that his art-making could be a part of the profoundsocial and political changes that were sweeping the county at the time. After returning to Europe to finish his prior commitments, he moved back to New York City where he re-formed his company and organized the Dancemobile. In 1966he premiered *Blues for the Jungle*, one of his signature works that included scathing commentaries on the history of racism in America.

**Contribution to the Field of Modernism**

Pomare’s dance aesthetics were shaped by diverse artists during his formative years. At the High School of Performing Artshe was influenced by pioneering modern dancers and educators—Martha Graham, José Limón, May O’Donnell, and Louis Horst. But he was also influenced by his associations with artists who were African-American, African, and West Indian—Curtis James, Asadata Dafora, and Geoffrey Holder. His teachers at thehigh school recognizeda radical strain in him from the beginning. He was admonished, for example, not to use avant-gardejazz music with his choreography, but he persisted and began the practice of using the groundbreaking music of jazz artists such as Charlie Mingus, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Max Roach.

His involvement with the Dancemobile led Pomare to choreograph dances for unconventional urban spaces. Using the back of a flatbed truck that expanded into a stage, his company was among the first to create a unique kind of mobile dance theatre that eschewed traditional venues and took performances to impoverished urban neighborhoods where many residentssaw concert dance for the first time. This was in line with Black Arts artists of the time who believed that their work should be used in the service of informing and empowering African-Americans in inner-city communities. In works such as *Beginsville*, which he created for the Dancemobile in1968, his choreography incorporated the doorways and stoops of apartment buildings, sidewalks, and alleyways, creating site-specificity for each performance of the work. In his solo, *Junkie*, from *Blues for the Jungle*, he blurred the traditional line between proscenium stage and audience when the drug-addicted protagonist stumbled out into the audience. In the same work, he used pedestrian movement and improvisation to help express the visceral reality of his subject matter. These were choreographic approaches that stemmed from his overriding interest in the dramatic possibilities of dance-theatre and his awareness of avant-garde experimentations in dance, theatre, and other art forms. For example, in another solo, *Narcissus Rising* (1968), Pomare used a minimalist approach, with the central figure maintaining a wide, bent-kneed stance while barely moving from one spot for most of the performance. This work was inspired by undergroundfilmmaker Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964), a paean to the fetishism and subliminal homoeroticism of motorcycle gang members.

**Legacy**

Pomare had a profound influence on modern dance through his teaching, his choreography, and his marked ability to discover and strengthen dancers’ unique artistry while coaching them in specific roles. He believed that art-making was a humanist pursuit that could embrace political and social activism. His international connections led to his significant impact on the development of modern dance in Australia, Taiwan, Europe, and South Africa. His works have been performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Ballettinstitutt in Oslo, Grace Hsiao Dance Theatre in Taipei, Australian Dance Theatre, and the Ballet Palacio das Artes in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

**John O. Perpener III**

**Selected List of Works**

*Cantos from a Monastery* (1958)

*Missa Luba* (1965)

*Blues for the Jungle* (1966)

*Las Desenamoradas* (1967)

*Narcissus Rising* (1968)

*Beginsville* (1968)

*Burnt Ash* (1971)

*Hushed Voices* (1974)

*The Queen’s Chamber* (1976)

*Postcards from Soweto*  (1992)

*Tabernacle* (1989)

*Aridez* (2002)

**References for further Reading**

Emery, L. F. (1972, 1988) *Black Dance from 1919 to Today,* Princeton: Princeton Book Company.

Fensham, R. (2013) ‘”Breakin’ the Rules”: Eleo Pomare and the Transcultural Choreographies of Black Modernity,’ *Dance Research Journal* 45 (1): 41-63.

Johnson, T. A. (1969) ‘I Must Be Black And Do Black Things,’ *New York Times* Sept. 7, II: 31.

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Wilson, A. T. (1993) ‘Eleo Pomare: “Pomare Power!”’ in *African American Genius in Modern Dance*, ed. G. Myers, Durham, NC: American Dance Festival.

1. J. Dunning (1983) ‘Dance: Celebration for Eleo Pomare’, *New York Times*, 17 November: C21. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)