

Subject: Note of Cassa Pancho

Cassa Pancho was interviewed by Susan Dalgetty Ezra, Chair of the London Ballet Circle on 26th September 2016 at the Civil Service Club.

Our Chairman welcomed one of London Ballet Circle's Vice-Presidents, Cassa Pancho MBE, the founder and award-winning Artistic Director of Ballet Black. This company was established to provide opportunities for dancers of black and Asian descent, especially in classical ballet. Cassa explained that her parents had no connection to the dance world, but they started her ballet career when she was two and a half years old, in Ealing. Initially she screamed before and after her classes but soon began to enjoy it!

Cassa took the Royal Academy of Dance exams and went on to train there. Most of her fellow students became teachers. However, she went on to take a degree in classical dance at Durham University, and she concentrated on choreography whilst studying there. In her final year she wrote a dissertation on the lack of black women in classical ballet in the United Kingdom. Whilst researching this she met Denzil Bailey. It took her five years to complete her studies as she had suffered a fractured back. She qualified as a teacher. On graduation in 2001 she founded Ballet Black, to provide the opportunities she had realised were missing for black classical dancers. Denzil Bailey was the Founding Ballet Master. She started looking for dancers to recruit by placing an advertisement in a black women's magazine, and relying on word of mouth. She found dancers who were interested in joining her company and she was offered free studio space one day a week for her company. Cassa and Denzil put together a performance at the Royal Academy of Dance, Maison Blanc donated cakes and champagne, her husband was the physiotherapist for Trinity College of Music so helped recruit student musicians to provide live music, her mother made costumes and 150 people attended that performance. The new company had a lot of well wishers and the performance made enough money to pay for another show. This was at the Cochrane Theatre as part of Black History Month.

In 2003 the Company really started to take off. It only performed new work - ballets created by Cassa, Denzil, Stephen Sheriff and Daniel Jones, all performed to live music. She realised that the company needed a repertoire and commissioned people to make work specifically for Ballet Black. She did not want pieces that were performed by the Royal Ballet or any other companies. Some choreographers approach the company for a commission and others are sought out. Cassa tries to create a balance between the work of the new, the up and coming and the established choreographers. It is easier for the company to afford choreographers based in this country.

The company performs at the Barbican Centre in London, as the Linbury Theatre is closed at present, and on tour, so all their ballets have to fit into a couple of suitcases! In the last year, the company has revived Christopher Hampson's *Storyville* and Arthur Pita created a pas de deux, *Cristaux*. Christopher Marney also created a new ballet, *To Begin, Begin*.

Cassa aims to create a balanced programme, and not to present three dark pieces on the same evening - and to finish the performance with a narrative ballet. The casting is not decided at the outset, but emerges as each piece is created. The company has sixteen tour dates before the end of 2016 and Cassa is also working on the next season.