



Karen Vedel

Patience and Perseverance

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An interview with Julienne Doko

By Karen Vedel

Julienne Doko is a choreographer, dance teacher and film maker with an MA in Anglo-American literature and history, a Master's degree in French and Francophone Literature, and another Master's degree in translation between French, Spanish and English. She was born in the Central African Republic, grew up in France and studied and worked in France, the US, Brazil and Canada before coming to Denmark. Her professional identity combines ballet, Jazz, Hip Hop, West African dance (Guinea), African contemporary, Afro-Brazilian dance and Samba. Drawing on a wide array of dance techniques, her artistic CV stands out as unique, not least in a Danish context. One of the first choreographies was presented in 2010, but it is only in the last couple of years that her work has received more substantial recognition.

The interview took place as two café meetings in Nørrebro in late September and early October 2024. When we first met, Julienne had just returned from teaching a week-long workshop at The Danish National School of Performing Arts in Holstebro. In the two weeks between the first and second meetings, she had been a part of the Danish delegation to Tanzmesse 2024 in Düsseldorf and also performed her work *W.O.M.B. (Worth of My Body)* at Kuyum Tanzplattform Neo-afrikanischer Tanz in Berlin – with success. Within the same time span, two of her dance videos, *Raven* (2023) and *The Way We...* (a collaboration with Kyrie Oda, 2004), had been featured at dance film festivals in the US. In other words, her work as a choreographer, teacher, and dance film maker is in demand both in and outside Denmark.

I am curious to learn more about the formative influences in her dancing and teaching, the turning points in her artistic development, the impetus for her choreographic works, and not least how – as an independent dance artist in her mid-40's, and the mother of three – she sustains her professional life from a base in Denmark.

A path guided by the dancer's intuition

KV:

To begin with, it would be great with a bit of background to your personal dance history?

JD:

In my childhood we would dance at home to my father's LPs with Congolese rumba and other music from different parts of the world. I loved to dance. At the age of 6, I began taking ballet classes in the local dance school. As the only black child doing ballet, I became aware of differences in body types e.g. in terms of flexibility and muscularity. After some years and as I progressed, my body did not respond too well to ballet, especially to the pointe shoes. At age 11, I switched to jazz dance, which felt much more compatible. I continued to take a weekly jazz class in my hometown, even after moving to Paris to study in preparation for entry into an elite school. At this point, however, I was already connecting to R&B and Rap/Hip Hop, so when I found myself in a Hip Hop class with a popular Parisian teacher, my body responded to the groundedness, the groove and the attitude. It felt like coming home and I took to dancing Hip Hop two-to-three times a week.

In 1999, while still an MA-student of Anglo-American literature and history, I got a grant to go to New York for three months and took off to dance Jazz, Street dance / Hip Hop and take 10 classes a week at the Alvin Ailey School of Dance and Stepz on Broadway. Later, after I had graduated, I wanted to go back and applied to universities in New York to become a teaching assistant – but was unsuccessful. Instead, I was invited to do a Master's in French and Francophone literature and be a teaching assistant at Portland State University, Oregon. There, I connected with a community who were into Brazilian dance. So, I started to dance Samba and Afro-Brazilian and performed with the group in the years 2002-04. It was also in Portland that I first encountered traditional West African dance from Guinea and was introduced to Afro-Cuban dancing. All of these styles, my body really liked, and I was curious to learn more. Taking a sabbatical from the university, I travelled first to Ghana, then to Brazil for the Carnival in Rio.

Back in France my mother worried that I would not be able to make a living with my two MAs in literature and nudged me to take a Master's degree in translation at the University of Orléans. I moved there for the first year of the studies and had Samba gigs on the weekends. But I did not want to stay in France and found an equivalent programme at Concordia University in Montreal, where I enrolled in 2005-2006.

Once more, I connected with the local Samba community, and also trained West African dance with the master teacher Oumar N'Diaye from Guinea at the school *Afrique en Movements*. When I learned of Zab Maboungou, a choreographer and teacher in African contemporary dance, who had developed her own technique based on Congolese dancing, I wondered if it would be something for me. The technique of Zab Maboungou, who is also a philosophy teacher, has emphasis on grounding, breath circulation, presence through the way we set our feet on the floor, mobility through slightly bent knees, etc. Taking classes with her changed my own dancing. It was she, who made me understand that technique is not reserved for ballet but exists in all dances. Identifying the different techniques in my own body, made me aware of details of how they work, for instance how we use weight shift, bounce, release/drop to amplify expression.

At the end of my school year at Concordia University, I decided that I wanted to dance professionally, so I was not so motivated to complete my degree and went to Brazil for an intensive course in the technique of Rosangela Silvestre. I ended up staying for a whole year – living in Salvador, training Afro-Brazilian dance and learning about the Orishas and Candomblé. Since Salvador has a big percentage of people of African descent and there was a strong interest in West African dance, I was myself encouraged to teach some classes in dances from Guinea that were well-received. This is also where I met the Danish man, who was later to become my partner. He was there to do his field research on Capoeira for his MA in History of Religion at University of Copenhagen.

Eventually, in 2008, after returning to France, I completed the MA in translation and went on to teach Samba in Paris and dance. But I had neither substantial work nor my own place to live.

First touch-down in Denmark

KV:

Later that year, when you came to Denmark, how did you tap into the dance community?

JD:

When I came to Copenhagen in 2008, I knew nothing of the dance scene here; I just arrived and moved in with my Danish boyfriend. He put me in touch with Meire Oliveira Santos – who knew the Silvestre technique. So that was my first connection into dance in Denmark.

Looking for work, and because I was used to how things worked in France, Canada and the US, I went to dance classes hoping to get spotted, but nothing happened. So, I tried more actively to tap into various networks and sent out applications. Since my artistic CV looked like no-one else's, it seemed to me like choreographers/companies did not know what to do with me as a performer, whereas in terms of teaching, there was some response expressing interest in African dance. So, I was placed in the African dance box and taught some classes at gyms, in the university sports program (USG), in private dance schools and for a short while also at what was then The National School of Contemporary Dance [Skolen for Moderne Dans].

In 2009, there was an audition looking for black dancers for the *von Scholten* musical production at Folketeatret. I got the job, but it did not open any other doors. So, I figured that if you want to be an active dancer in Denmark, you need to create your own thing, in order to show what you can do.

KV:

How did you go about this? I don't remember there being a lot of options for independent dance artists to show their work at the time?

JD:

The first possibility to present my work in Denmark came with the *Spot On* showcase in Dansehallerne in 2010. I created the piece *Riposte* and invited Meire Santos and Zozo Mposula to be part of it. Later we performed it with

Marylise Tanvet. This was also the first time I worked with the musician Gert Østergaard Pedersen for a choreographic creation.

I continued to reach out, but because there was so much dancing in me and so little response in terms of jobs, I turned my focus away from Denmark and wrote to Zab Maboungou in Montreal to ask if she would be needing a dancer. She did, and in 2011 I moved with my partner to Canada to dance with Zab Maboungou/Compagnie Danse Nyata Nyata and continue in her two-year artistic and professional training program. I also reconnected and continued training with Oumar N'Diaye from Guinea. Additionally, I took dance classes in Senegalese Sabar.

While in Montreal, I was inspired to develop choreographies of my own. The first impetus came from the film *Venus Noire* (2010) about Sarah Baahrtman of the Khoikhoi people in South Africa, who was put on display in Europe in the early 1800s. It sparked my decision to create a work based on how I have experienced the (racialised) perception of my own body. The result was named *Corps Accords* [alternately, in a play of words, named *Corps à Corps*] and set on a regular stage but also in a boxing ring. I presented it in festivals in Canada and abroad in Burkina Faso and in Cote d'Ivoire.

At this point, I was no longer part of the Nyata Nyata Company, so while developing my own work, I had Samba shows in the weekends and taught dance classes to cover expenses. My next choreography, *Mémoires Perdues*, was presented in Montreal in 2013. The piece was inspired by the overload of negative news broadcasts, and I integrated spoken word by Fabrice Koffy Poesic with some Afro-Brazilian Orishas symbology. A second version of *Mémoires Perdues* was developed the following year in Brazil, where it became a duo between me and another spoken word artist and capoeirista – who brought in a new text in Portuguese, that changed the musicality of the piece. In a third version, the piece was turned into a music/dance film, my second work in video-dance. After remounting it with four other artists in Copenhagen, it has become a solo with spoken word in English by Norwegian artist Hannah Wozene Kvam that I have presented in Norway, the US, Tanzania and Denmark.



Julienne Doko in the solo *Mémoires Perdues* at Union PDX Festival in Montreal, 2022. Photo by Jingzi Zhao.

After three years abroad, I got pregnant with twins, and we needed to make a decision about where to settle as a family. Since I had continued to pay my unemployment insurance, the conditions for maternity leave would be better in Denmark than in France, so in 2014 we returned to Denmark. A few months after giving birth, I presented *Corps à Corps* at *Loona Nights*, the showcase for dance at Dansehallerne (the national centre for dance and choreography in Denmark), and was encouraged by the positive response – even if there were no immediate effects in terms of job opportunities. When I saw an audition call from the choreographer Kitt Johnson, I hesitated at first, thinking I didn’t have the right profile given my eclectic dance background, but since they were looking for “global” performers, I gave it a chance. Shortly after the audition,

I started working as a French teacher at International School of Hellerup, which was kind enough to accommodate my schedule as a performer in Kitt Johnson's *Stafet* in 2017.

In 2018, the film version of *Mémoires Perdues* was selected to be screened at Dansehallerne's monthly dance film showing *Choreography By Intervention* taking place at the exhibition space Kunsthal Charlottenborg

Finally, the scene in Denmark seemed to be opening up.

Teaching dance students to reconcile the body, the heart and the feet

KV:

Does the repertoire of dance styles change relative to where you teach?

JD:

As already mentioned, there seemed to be very few West African dance teachers teaching in professional dance education programmes, when I first came to Denmark. This is what I mainly taught, and this is how I was boxed. In another context, such as Montreal, where there is a community around Guinean and Senegalese master dancers and teachers, I would not teach West African dance. There, my position would be that of a student. Instead, I would generally teach Samba, Aerosalsa, contemporary dance or Street dance.

While living in Brazil again in 2013-14, I was invited to teach at Fundação Cultural do Estado da Bahia in Salvador, where I had already been giving some classes in West African dance back in 2007. The participants whether professionals or not, were super motivated and eager to learn dances from the "motherland". Of course, I made it clear that I am not a master and that I have trained with Oumar N'Diaye, among other teachers.

KV:

In terms of African dances, could you say a bit about the distinction between traditional and contemporary in dance?

JD:

What we tend to think of as traditional dance refers to codified movements set to certain rhythms that are still being practiced. They are typically linked to a specific ritual or celebration in a given culture/ethnic group. But there is not necessarily a dichotomy between traditional and contemporary. What we call traditional dance is not fixed in time as it is continuously evolving.

In contemporary dance, I see a broad spectrum of expressions, narratives, identities and stories. Building on contemporary technique that may also include modern dance, ballet, etc, the practitioners' contemporary style may incorporate "traditional"/artistic cultural and technical elements. I see African traditional dance and contemporary dance more as a continuum where both genres feed into each other.

KV:

How has the response to your teaching in Denmark changed over the years?

JD:

Upon our return to Copenhagen in 2014, I again sent out a lot of emails... and got some response. By now the dance scene had become more diverse with several teachers teaching African dance styles in Copenhagen, for instance Alky Plus from Guinea, Mbaye Art, who teaches Sabar or Colossal Titan who teaches Afrobeat/Ndombolo at World Dance Academy. Hip Hop/Street dance were also becoming more visible on the mainstream scene, for instance with Sara Jordan's Detour Dance Festival.

Together with Meire Santos, we set up regular classes in Silvestre Technique and African contemporary that ran for a few months. Currently, I teach at Dance Maze, which is convenient because it entails less organising for me. Some students are regulars but there are also new faces every time. On the whole, however, I have found a much greater curiosity and readiness to try something new in the US than in Denmark – both among professional and non-professional dancers. Especially in Denmark but also in Montreal, I find that self-consciousness inhibits people in their freedom to move. As a dancer you need to let go, release the apprehension, and trust your body. To liberate

yourself you must reconcile the body, the heart, and the feet. Movements that don't carry the dancer's soul, passion or intention are merely empty shapes.

KV:

How do you pass this on?

JD:

My approach is to guide the dancers to inhabit and be comfortable in their bodies. I give them the technical tools to loosen up and be present in the movements so that at any moment they can dance and express themselves. This is why I am intent on groove – on teaching them how to fall into the weight of the body. It is not a bad thing to be heavy when dancing; in the end, it opens up the expression and your aura expands further out.

When I teach, my goal is not the perfection of steps – no, I want to see you! For instance, I always work with the release of the back in order to free the students' bodies, and with giving weight in the steps in order to get more presence from the floor. In Holstebro, I taught two choreographies and could feel, as the days went by, how the dancers were releasing more and more. At the end of the week, they all felt liberated enough to take the space, do the choreography solo, and engage in dialogue with each other and the musician. They were happy – as was I.

Expanding the demographic of dance in Denmark

KV:

Your choreographies result from year-long processes. Where have you found not only the inspiration, but also the support required to bring your creative work to fruition?

JD:

The creation of *W.O.M.B. (Worth of My Body)* was initiated in 2017. Drawing from our own experiences as mothers, I wanted to make a piece about motherhood, the pain, and the bodily changes that come with giving birth. Before the full piece was completed in 2022, all of the three dancers in the

cast had had another child – for Naa Ayeley it was the second child, for me and Meire Santos, it was the third.

The first 10-minute long version of *W.O.M.B.* was presented at *Loona Nights* in 2017. I made sure it was recorded on video, because I wanted to continue to work with the piece. In 2020, I contacted The Project Centre in Dansehallerne for advice on how to apply for funding from the Danish Arts Foundation. When the negative result of the application came, it was very discouraging. The next year, when I secured a spot at Aaben Dans (Open dance) and HAUT's Open Lab, the mirror section was added, and new visual documentation was produced. As I had an invitation to a festival in Norway and wanted to move ahead, I contacted The Project Centre once more, and Priscilla Rasmussen taught me how to structure my next application. It was a hard process, but I got the grant and could hire a producer. They then helped me with the application for the Bikuben Foundation that enabled the premiere of *W.O.M.B.* at the venue Dansekapellet in 2022.

The curated choreographic exhibition *Embodied Journeys*, which was my next project, also took years before it was realised. The idea was born when I was in Montreal in 2013. It was supposed to take place there, with local artists. But in 2014, being back in Denmark, pregnant and suffering from nausea, I had to put it aside for later. In 2021, I had gained more experience and decided to pitch the idea to Danjel Andersson (Director of Dansehallerne). As a result, the project was co-produced by Dansehallerne together with Den Frie Udstillingsbygning (Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art) within the framework of the *Close Encounters* edition 2023. In the process of working with Anne Mai Slot Vilmann and Mie Hyllested Meyle from Dansehallerne, I came to appreciate the importance of having the support of professionals in fundraising and production.

KV:

Are you, yourself, aware of building shoulders for others to stand on?

JD:

After 2020 and in the spirit of Black Lives Matter, my idea of *Embodied Journeys* was committed to creating a space where the demographic of dance in Den-

mark would be expanded – both on stage and in the audience. The program featured six works by pan-African and Afro-European choreographers. I invited five artists to create works that examined the perception of the Black body. For my own part, I remounted *Corps Accords* and performed it with dancer Meire Santos and drummer/musician Simin Ramezanali in a similar set to the one I had used in 2013, namely a boxing ring. One of my recent projects is the video installation version of *W.O.M.B. (Worth of My Body)*. For this version I invited more mothers to join in making a dance film of the piece – which we did, 10 of us, in a one-day shoot. The energy from those 10 bodies was incredible. It was like an army of mothers!

Seeing the audiences of *Embodied Journeys* and of *W.O.M.B.* at K-Selekt in May 2024, I would say that both were successful in terms of connecting with a broader demographic.

How to sustain an international career in dance and choreography...

KV:

Is your goal to build a company as a more permanent base for your work?

JD:

I am the artistic director of Julianne Doko Dance (the name might change), which is a significant step towards achieving my creative goals. However, at this moment it would not work for me to have a set cast. Because of the way I operate in the world, I like to be free to move – be flexible to the extent it is possible.

I collaborate with the independent producer Anne Mai Slot Vilmann, but with a varied workflow and limited money, it is not possible yet to keep us on a steady salary. The hope is to get to a point where I can be employed, along with a staff (producer and administrator) on a long-term payroll.

KV:

In terms of infrastructural support, what does it take to sustain and further develop your artistic work?

JD:

I continue to be on the lookout for opportunities, jobs, funding. Being invited to present our work is always greatly appreciated, as it happened this year (2024), when the *W.O.M.B. (Worth of My Body)*-video installation was presented at a research symposium at Aarhus University - or when we were invited to perform the stage piece at a festival in Berlin. However, most often, i.e. 90% of the time, it's me going after an opportunity either in Denmark or abroad that gets me a teaching job or a spot to present my work.

One important step towards building a more sustainable company in the future is to develop solid partnerships with institutions (presenters, residency centres, networks, etc.) early in the creation process. That is one of my focuses now for the upcoming projects.

Currently, I am working on a duet entitled *The Way We...* co-created with Kyrie Oda (Gothenburg) and co-funded by Sweden and Denmark. The creative process is organised around residencies, the first of which took place in Malmö (in February 2023). The second was in Germaine Acogny's Ecole des Sables in Senegal in October 2023, the third was in Gothenburg in February 2024 and the latest was in Copenhagen. We will have a showing in November this year in Sweden and will premiere it in February 2025 in Copenhagen. To produce like this requires a lot of planning. And, as we are both mothers, it means leaving the kids behind, which is not always a good feeling. My partner also travels, so he and I are crucial in each other's support structures – as are our parents, whom we call to help out from time to time.

Julienne Doko is a Copenhagen-based French dance performer, teacher and choreographer. Her movement and dramaturgical line take inspiration from her homelands and the journeys she has taken in between. Julienne has performed internationally in various companies, festivals, TV shows and musicals.

Karen Vedel is Associate Professor in Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. Coming from a professional background in dance, she has worked extensively to further the visibility of dance and choreography as an art form in Denmark – both in the cultural political arena and in academia.
