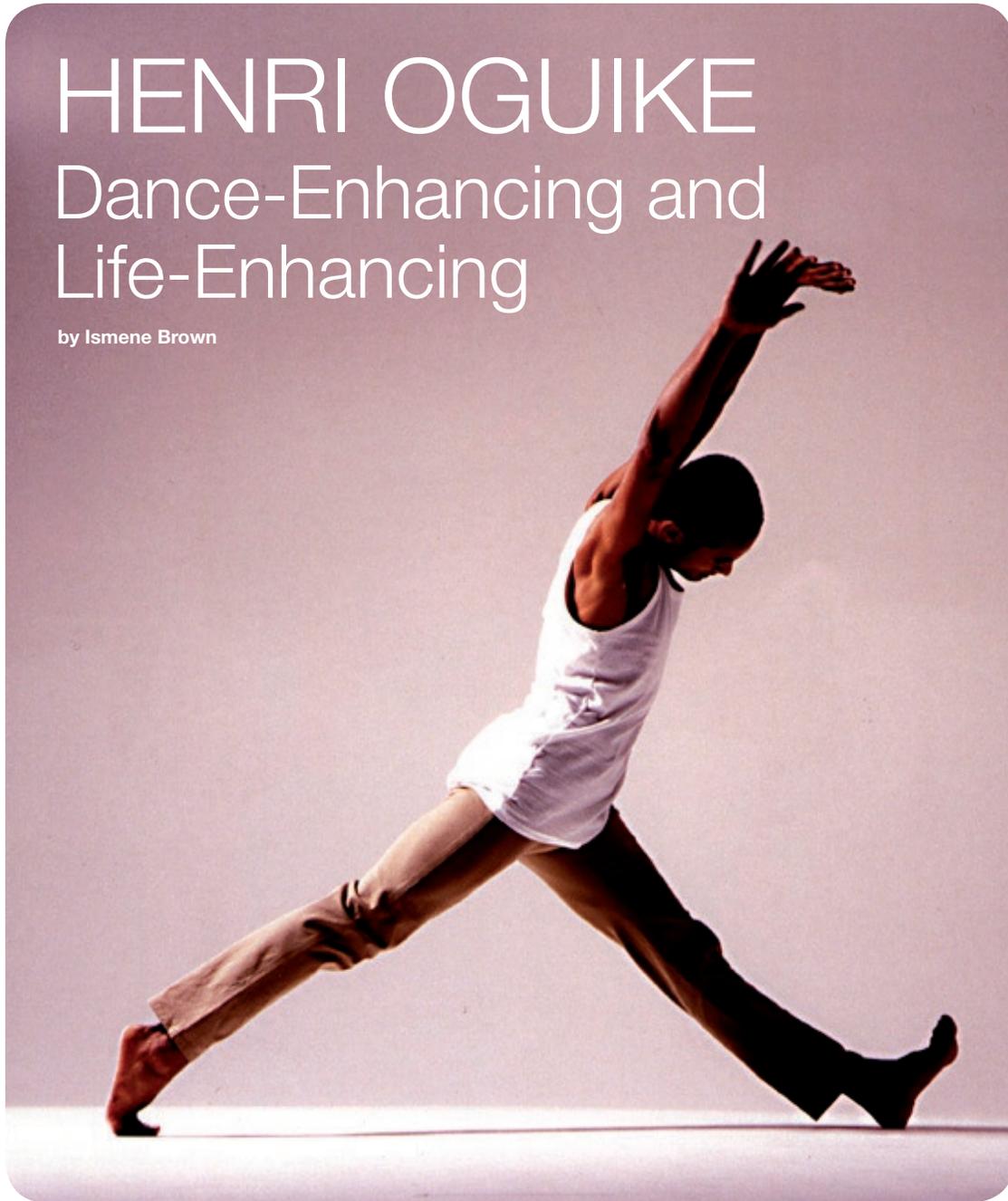


HENRI OGUIKE

Dance-Enhancing and Life-Enhancing

by Ismene Brown



It's hard to stick even a modestly interesting set of steps together, as all dance teachers know, trying to build new combinations to use with students. But to move from competent mechanics to poetry - to write a speaking sentence in dance, to build, evolve and phrase steps into movement with an instinctive flow and destination, to taper or punctuate them with outbursts and stillness, emphasis or sudden quiet, to make the movement change colour as the music changes its mind, or play with an accidental slice of light, to succeed in making the watcher smile, or cry, or suddenly understand something - this is what only a rare bird, a true choreographer, can do.

In dance's history there have been plenty of outstanding male soloists who turned to stepmaking, fashioning a language impressively, at first, on their personal grace and physical coordination. But not many have sailed in flourishing creative health past their 10th anniversary of creativity. The tenth anniversary is, under the celebration, an ominous point. It often comes at the age when the outstanding dancer-who-choreographs has to face the fact that he can no longer honestly make his own charismatic body the focus

of his creation, but must now relaunch his imagination via other dancers' different physical and mental make-up, selflessly transfer his personal, self-absorbed instincts to other instruments. It doesn't always work.

It's been the distinction of Henri Oguike's choreography from his start in 1999 that he always appeared to have such an inborn grasp of these complexities, plus an inquisitiveness and relish in musical and visual theatre that makes him one of the teaspoonful of dancemakers who can satisfy and surprise you at the same time.

Everything about Henri is unexpected. His forceful and individual dances burst impatiently into too-small stages on his too-constricted tours, refusing to be cowed by lack of space, and so musically sophisticated and intellectually adventurous that I doubt any watcher would guess that their creator was once written off as a teenage no-hoper in Britain's underclass. To grow up in a blighted former steel town in Wales as a mixed-race boy, half Nigerian, half Welsh, to quit school without qualifications, and with only Tesco's or the fire service to aspire to, this is an almost comically unlikely start for a remarkable

choreographer. The only dance Henri knew in Port Talbot was street-dance until he took up modern dance evening classes in his late teens to fill his aimless time.

From then on his self-improvement has been a journey of evident delight. There are his eager discoveries of far-from-mainstream music by Shostakovich, Bartók, Tippett or Yamaguchi, and his instinctive matching of them by a fierce choreographic language that naturally alters in tone when it meets a different composer. There is his unprejudiced curiosity that in 'Seen of Angels' cast a completely fresh light on Handel's 'Messiah', bypassing its familiar highlights and drawing a passionate story about family love from its recitatives. From his dancing career with Richard Alston in the mid-1990s he quietly absorbed a wealth of knowledge about classical virtues in graceful line and musical flow, but he has kept the blood of his background coursing into a rich merger with these new streams, street-dance's acrobatic athleticism and the African eloquence of hand and arm gestures, which give him a fine weaponry for wit (his Scarlatti dance 'White Space' is a joyously clever romp of satirical period manners, modern erotic play and musical repartee).

If Oguike had only created 'Front Line', he would be assured of a permanent mark in the contemporary dance of our time; this extraordinarily confident 2002 meeting of minds with some of Shostakovich's most despairing music gripped audiences' imaginations from their first encounter with it, and was rapidly taken onto the GCSE dance syllabus. As he habitually does, he blew much of his skin-tight budget on having live musicians, and his integration of the four immobile string-players with his rampant dancers

is remarkable, a provocative, unafraid contrast, almost a conflict, especially when the dancers thump their feet so hard they almost obliterate the musicians - but this battle between sounds to be heard, this competition for our eyes between frenzy and stillness, all focus back truthfully on Shostakovich's 9th quartet. But I have been equally thrilled by the fevered romanticism with which he responded to Bartók's 2nd violin concerto in 'In broken tendrils' or the beautifully observant dialogue between solid community and private individual in 'Tippett's Concerto for Double String Orchestra' (an unusual, rewarding festival commission with a full live orchestra inside St Edmundsbury Cathedral).

Oguike describes how he thinks about choreography in chess-like terms, about weaving a network of moves and countermoves of movement, sound, light and space - plotting and structuring his dances with perfectionist attention. He is inspired by Doris Humphrey, and has also begun to evolve a challenging choreographic teaching method. Though this might sound dense and unyielding, his restless intellectualism is a strength of his work, the steering and controlling gears for his romantic spirit. I remember seeing a performance of two of his sextets, the edgy tango Melancholy Thoughts and Front Line, where, a day before, one of his dancers had been injured. Within hours (and with the patience of his supremely talented and responsive dancers) Oguike painstakingly rearranged, twice, six parts for five, and remarkably the dances still had impact and integrity.

And I think of variety, not rigidity, being Oguike's salient drawing-point. Uniquely among British choreographers,

he usually makes two or three new works a season, and programmes proper mixed bills, mixed in music and theatrics as well as in choreographic muscle and tone. It's the liveliest pleasure to be treated to an evening linking, say, Scarlatti, taiko and Handel, or Shostakovich, marimbas and Bill Evans - or, visually, computer graphics, gigantic drums and carnival plumes. If current practice in contemporary choreography is for the menacing annual doorstopper, the electronic-buzzing, dark-lit 75-minuter, to be shown continually over a season, and including all the expected tics, trademarks and woolly theorising that appeared in previous seasons' offerings, Oguike's inclination to do his damndest to give his public a good time, and not outstay the welcome of any dance, is closer to that of Paul Taylor or Mark Morris. Like them, he is one of life's enhancers. And one of dance's enhancers.

His almost yearly array of awards and nominations since 1999 marks the regard with which UK critics hold him, and he impressed the hard-to-please contemporary circles of New York at Jacob's Pillow in 2007. His passion for education makes him sought-after by schools, but it's the big theatre stages that need Oguike's space-devouring, all-encompassing, civilisation-relishing talent. Oguike is big. Ten years on it's his stages that have got small. Most contemporary dance is groomed by bureaucratic forces for the small scale. Oguike's choreography has the bursting artistic qualities to break the mould. The next stage of his career should take place on large stages with large forces, and bring big audiences and contemporary dance together in rumbustious delight.