Scottish Ballet’s Half Hour Call podcast

Pilot episode 1: Diversity in Ballet transcript

Scottish Ballet’s CEO/Artistic Director Christopher Hampson is joined by Cassa Pancho MBE, Artistic Director & Founder of Ballet Black and Rishan Benjamin, Scottish Ballet Artist, to explore how the dance community can do more to stamp out racism within the industry, and beyond.

**Christopher:** Hello and welcome to Cassa and Rishan who are joining me today. Thanks so much for joining us.

**Cassa:** Thank you for having me.

**Rishan:** Thank you.

**Christopher:**Let’s just start off by talking about perhaps how we know each other, because we do know each other. Cassa, we have known each other for many decades but our listeners would be grateful to hear your story and how you came to set up Ballet Black.

**Cassa:** I’ve been answering this question for a long time and I don’t have one really good two-sentence answer. So I’ll give you today’s version. First of all, we know each other because you used to come to the place where I was training and you taught us ballet, so part of all of that in my final year at school was professional life in ballet and as someone of dual heritage I had always wondered where the people of colour were in ballet, as in Black people.

Having tried and failed to find four or five professional Black females in ballet in the UK to interview for my dissertation as part of my third year, I decided when I left school to try to start a ballet class because the overwhelming information from the people I did interview, who were contemporary dancers or male ballet dancers working in the UK or women working in America, was that they were always the only Black face in the room throughout their training and then often in their professional job - or one of two, perhaps. And I thought: what would happen if the teacher of the class was Black and would change the power structure, so that immediately the person in charge, the person with the power, looks like you? So I asked my friend Denzil Bailey, who had been one of the first Black dancers at what I think was Festival Ballet when he joined (and then became English National Ballet), to teach for me - and immediately that just changed the make-up of the room.

We had people coming from all over the country, all different disciplines – they weren’t all ballet dancers but they all wanted to come and be taught by someone who looked like them and was also excellent in his own field, and that’s where Ballet Black began. And then it has, over 20 years, turned into a full-time touring company with a school and associate programme.

**Christopher:** And, more than that Cassa, what it’s turned into is also a place that nurtures new creative voices as well as everything else.

**Cassa:** Yes, so the goal of the company originally was to have Black and Asian role models on stage, so that any young kid coming to a show would look on stage and anywhere on stage they looked, there would be someone who might reflect them or their family in some way. And alongside that - almost accidentally because we were only eight dancers and we didn’t want to do Swan Lake or Giselle because we were in the same city as English National Ballet and the Royal Ballet - I started to commission work from choreographers who wanted to make ballet, which is something that wasn’t really happening in ballet then; we didn’t really get the chance to make new work, it was always existing repertoire.

So accidentally it became a place to create new work and became one of the only places where if you wanted to create something new and classical, the idea was people would go to Ballet Black. So even if they didn’t care about the mission or what we were doing, if they wanted to get their work on a London stage, we were one of the best places to go. And that has turned into something that has become equally as important I think and gets remarked upon as much as the ethnicity of our dancers. So we still haven’t got to a point where our race isn’t mentioned in a review, but now it’s a quick sentence at the top and then they talk about the work.

**Christopher:** And if I can step you back to your younger self asking those questions, what were the initial reactions you were facing?

**Cassa:** Silence. Complete silence. No response from any of the schools I wrote to, no response from the companies. A response from Chance To Dance. I mean, I was a graduate from school so I knew nothing about being in the company or running any kind of business and there was no framework for starting a ballet company – no recent framework, so we have companies obviously founded by people in this country but they’re all gone. There wasn’t really anyone around to ask how to do this and again there wasn’t access, I mean like email was becoming a thing at that point for me so it wasn’t like I could email Dance Theatre of Harlem and ask them something. The closest I got to them was a VHS video in the school library of Creole Giselle that I could watch and actually see Black dancers on stage. So it all felt like a real shot into nothing because I didn’t know how to do it and I hadn’t seen how it was done by others who could tell me how it was done.

**Christopher:**And after that initial goal that you have outlined and the initial challenges that you had, well silence in itself, what has been changing over the last 20 years?

**Cassa:** I think we went from being completely under the radar and nobody knowing what we were doing to possibly becoming a bit of an irritant with the name Ballet Black. It really upset people then and still upsets people now. But then I think what helped us push our way into the mainstream consciousness of the ballet world, which is miniscule compared to everything else in the world, was creating work by up and coming choreographers that sort of forced you to come to our show and to take us seriously.

That led to things like nominations and funding and I think those things got us recognised as a dance company that was still here and that took about 10 years, and then people started to recognise the excellence of the dancers. But it was always 'They’re good for Black dancers, they have nice technique for Black dancers' and then it became 'Wow, those dancers, how do I get to make a work on them?' But it took a while, it took a really long time.

**Christopher:** Yeah, and I remember going to the very early shows ,if not the first show, and the development of the company and recognising that it became and remains a place where people search to go and create for, and seeing that journey has been quite amazing.

**Cassa:** It took a while!

**Christopher:** Rishan, you come to our story in – you know, you’ve heard Cassa’s journey, it would be good to hear your own personal journey as to how you got to Scottish Ballet. So how did you start out in dance?

**Rishan:** So, I didn’t originally start doing ballet because I wanted to do it, I was chosen through the Chance to Dance programme run by the Royal Ballet, and they go round to different primary schools picking out children who have the potential to become professional dancers or take on ballet. So I was kind of 'found' there and it started from then. I would only do one class per week with them, and then as I progressed I was told to do more than one class to pick up my technique but my mum couldn’t afford it - she was a single parent so she was paying for everything, taking care of all of us, my siblings, so it was quite difficult for her to pay for the classes and keep it going.

But somehow she found the money and I’m here now so I went through that for a few years and auditioned for Central School of Ballet. I hit sixteen and I thought 'You know what, this is something I want to do for the long run', so I started working really hard on my technique and performance. We did so many styles at Central like jazz and contemporary and yeah, hit third year and audition season came up. I wasn’t sure where I wanted to go; I knew that I really wanted to do contemporary but then I also enjoyed ballet a lot. I enjoyed it a lot more than contemporary, but I considered myself to be more of a contemporary dancer because that was the style I was pushed towards and you [Christopher] came in to Central to take a class, which I didn’t think was an audition, but you picked me out, I went off to do a two-day audition at Scottish Ballet which was unexpected, and yeah - I’m here! I got the contract and now I’m in Scottish Ballet.

**Christopher:** When Scottish Ballet crossed your path and you were offered a contract, what was your perception of the company before joining?

**Rishan:**To be completely honest, I didn’t even know Scottish Ballet existed. I was only made aware of it because Amy, who was in the year above me, had gotten into the company. It just didn’t cross my mind to audition because I just didn’t know it really existed and then also I was having a conversation with one of the other dancers in the company recently about how when it comes to ballet companies, when you see it is mainly a white company – which is basically all companies, all ballet companies – in some ways subconsciously you don’t believe you can make it. I just didn’t believe I would make it in some ways so I didn’t even try, which on my part was a bit like ‘You could have tried at least’ but you just get this mindset that you’re not going to make it.

**Christopher:** Had you felt that even before Scottish Ballet? Did you think Central was an option before you went to Central?

**Rishan:**Well, it didn’t cross my mind because my mum never made me aware of it. I was aware of it as in I could see it in the room, but I was too young to understand what that meant. So it didn’t cross my mind before, it was only slightly before getting into Scottish and being here that I came to the realisation that oh, this is a lot harder than it’s been made out to be.

**Christopher:** Cassa is this a story that reflects many times over, presumably?

**Cassa:**Yeah, I mean you’re just describing everything I heard and everything I knew from my friends and colleagues and every reason I started Ballet Black – so that when a kid came to see us, they would think oh, maybe ballet is for me. I mean definitely countless people have told me how they were encouraged into contemporary and musical theatre over ballet, sometimes because a teacher also just thought there’s no job for this student if I push them into ballet, they should go where the job is going to be secure, but I think sometimes it is just that unconscious idea that is in the teacher’s mind of what ballet looks like.

And even though they’re presented with new students every year who might change what ballet looks like, they are still on that path of a certain type of people go here, and a certain type of people go there.

**Christopher:**We’ve heard Cassa your journey and the changes that you’ve brought, Rishan we’ve heard from you about what you’ve experienced and what you’re seeing, but where do you think we are as an industry?

**Rishan:**I’d say we’ve still got a lot of work to do. In some ways I’d like to talk about representation a lot because when doing the Chance to Dance programme there’s a lot of diversity at the start but there’s a point in the middle where it just declines, like we just disappear, and I never really understand why but I could see it. And a lot of people like to say it’s the starting point and we need to do more work there but it’s not, there are so many programmes, like for example there’s your programme Cassa where you’ve got the junior class or the outreach programme, that’s been going for about 20 years – well, I’m not sure, I don’t want to speak on your part…

**Cassa:**Well the junior school for ages three and up has been going for 20 years, and then the associate programme to try and catch girls from about 12, pre going to a school like central or the royal ballet school, to try and support them and not lose them in that void you were just talking about.

**Rishan:** And there’s also the Chance to Dance programme that’s been going for 30 years so there’s something there at the start, it’s just working out what’s going on in the middle and I think because there isn’t representation with the dancers at the top, it then kind of affects the dancers in the middle. And then there’s also finances, because I know for me I couldn’t afford to carry on dancing, but I don’t want to generalise and say it’s everyone or that it’s what most dancers go through or most dancers of colour don’t have the money to do ballet because that’s not the case - that’s just my story. But I’m just really unsure of what it is that’s stopping coloured dancers from making it past that middle ground.

**Christopher:** Cassa, have you got any answers for that?

**Cassa:**I have opinions and I think some of it is what you’ve just described Rishan; lack of funds or lack of awareness of where these programmes are or where to find the funding to do it. I think some of it is families seeing a very Caucasian finishing line as in the professional company, like 'Go get a job that’s going to serve you in life because you’ll never be in there with all these Caucasian dancers and company systems'. I think there are loads of preconceptions about Black women’s bodies and what it means to be Black in a classical ballet setting and how certain stereotypes that are carried across all industries, but are particularly magnified in ballet, where we have repertoire that is all about women being saved by men and if you add in stereotypes about what society thinks Black women are, they don’t mesh. We know, we always hear, Black women are angry, Black women are aggressive, tough, strong and these tags, whether they are true or not – and I just think you cant say Black women as a blanket just like you cant say white women are all weak, you know? – these don’t match with Giselle or Swan Lake or these ideas that people have about, not just women, but I think women bear the brunt of it. Because I think there is room for the virile Black male to be in ballet but there's not as much room for a Black woman to be in ballet for the kind of work we have had traditionally.

So, yes we see certain dancers coming through, but we are still, we’re only a few decades from people saying one Black women in the call will be distracting, you know? It’s not that long ago it was said. Whereas Ailey has Black dancers, white dancers, Asian dancers and I’ve certainly never been upset by the one white dancer on stage or distracted by them so I just don’t think that any of that is true, but it’s something that’s been allowed to be continued.

**Christopher:**The artform itself, are you saying, keeps reproducing the barriers in itself? Does the work need to change?

**Cassa:** I think there is room for our traditional ballet heritage, I do - some of it. I just think sometimes what happens is the dancers who are Black or mixed race in a company are there for the modern work and they’re not cast in the big, classic things. And so the company can say we have Black dancers, they are featured, they are the leading role in this ballet but are they used across all ballets? And that’s where I think our ballet leaders, our directors and répétiteurs and whoever is gatekeeping this work, need to open their understanding and their own minds about who can be cast in these works. Basically every dancer in your company should be able to dance in every work that you have.

**Christopher:** Rishan, is that something you feel and recognise?

**Rishan:**Yeah, I totally agree and it kind of supports the idea of tokenism. One thing I’ve noticed in many companies is they have one or two Black dancers and they always seem to keep it that way. They don’t add any more, there aren’t any more coming in and then once one of them leaves they seem to replace them with another dancer. I’m not sure why that is, it could be exactly what Cassa said - just using them for modern dance styles or to make the company look like it’s more diverse than it actually is. But they never seem to be used in classical ballet and that’s something that needs to improve.

**Christopher:**Cassa you spoke in the beginning about facing into the ballet world and receiving silence back. I know through my relationship with Ballet Black that this past year and a half has been very much the opposite of silence. That flood of noise, I know that has stretched both you and Ballet Black. But what do you hope will come from the discussions that have only just begun in the last year?

**Cassa:**It’s happening in different companies at different speeds but for me I think we need an acknowledgement that ballet has had a big problem and that has left us with a problem today. So even though we are seeing more Black dancers across all the big British companies and we know things like dancers now are maybe encouraged to have brown shoes or tights in a professional setting or we’re going to learn how to do your hair in braids or whatever companies are pledging now, that’s great, but it’s all surface decoration for me.

I want the companies, even if it’s an inherited legacy - so it’s not the director today who has created Petrushka or said we don’t want that one Black girl in the ballet - but I think we need all of them to look back as we are very good at doing in ballet, but this time look back and recognise and acknowledge what has happened and what that has left us with today. And then we can get into talking about repertoire, and what it means to be a Black person in a classical ballet space. And hopefully that will be just a few horrible years of really getting into it and then we will come out the other side much improved, but I don’t know if that’s going to happen.

**Christopher:**Within the art form and changes we’ve seen over the last couple of decades, Rishan you’ve arrived at a ballet company at a point where due to Cassa’s legacy and Ballet Black, Freeds of London now do [shoes of the] correct skin tone for black and brown dancers. In a sense you’re of a completely different generation, but I hear that you’re still facing some of the same problems because the artform itself is still evolving. But how does it feel as a dancer today to know that - so for instance I saw Cassa, I saw your company at the Royal Albert Hall on Thursday last week and no pancake shoes, which was great. And Rishan I know that is something that you have hated in the last couple of years before you joined Scottish Ballet. Perhaps you can talk a little bit about that?

**Rishan:** So before I joined I didn’t really need to pancake my shoes because the uniform was pink tights and pink shoes, but whenever I did pancake my shoes was when we had Saturday classes, which was a time we could wear our own leotards and tights. But the other day I borrowed another dancer in the company’s shoes and I decided to pancake them because I didn’t want to wear pink pointe shoes in class. I’m not going back. I'm so grateful for the brown Freed pointe shoes because that took, I kid you not, hours just for one pair and then doing multiple coats to make sure it was one equal colour. So I’m very grateful for the brown pair of pointe shoes and I remember distinctly when the box came and I had to get a picture with them because I was just in shock because I was like do you see this? Do you see the co-ordination because it really suits my skintone. I felt so good in class, it really elongates your legs and I appreciate it, it’s brought a lot to ballet, black dancers especially.

I do remember going out for a drink with Chira one time and she was telling me about how you guys started it up with Freed and how you had to go and get your own fabric or material for the pointe shoes over them doing it for you. I didn’t understand why that was.

**Cassa:** Chira Robinson is a senior artist with Ballet Black. Chira was in the shop and you know how they do every colour in the rainbow except brown, she said can you make me a brown shoe and they said well if you can find the material. I think they thought it was a one off, and probably for Chira it was a one off because she had come in and was, like you, although having had 20 years of pancaking her shoes, was over it - really over it. I think that was someone working on the shop floor and when Chira told me what was happening I spoke to someone in management and said how about you find the satin and we’ll help you with the colours and the stress testing and they were very enthusiastic about it so yes it started like that, but quickly turned into a proper search with the professionals doing their bit.

**Christopher:** So we’re winding up to our beginner’s call and this is an opportunity for Cassa and Rishan to just share with us anything that we’ve reflected on, anything you want our listeners to be thinking about or anything you want to add to that we’ve discussed today. There is so much more we could be discussing, there is no end to it, but if you have any thoughts that would be great.

**Rishan:** I’ve virtually got one thing and it’s about the term Black ballerina. So I’m very proud of my heritage and being a Black woman but the term Black ballerina I have a little problem with it in a sense that I feel like it separates us from everyone else. You wouldn’t hear the term white ballerina or anything other than that so whenever I see the term Black ballerina I’m instantly like hmm, could you not just say ballet dancer or ballerina? Why do you have to use the term Black ballerina?

**Cassa:**Rishan you are just describing Ballet Black’s life. People will say 'We want to hire a Black dancer' – what does that mean? For what? What are you going to do with them? We don’t rent people out here so can you rephrase that, can you come with a genuine reason to want to use one of our dancers for anything.

I think I would follow on from Rishan by saying the same thing for us and the press. None of the Ballet Black dancers ever get interviewed about being ballet dancers, end of discussion. It’s always can you tell us about the trauma and the sacrifices and the difficulties you faced to become a dancer who is Black. And sometimes I think that conversation is valid because I think about little girls who might think that ballet isn’t for them and if they could hear from Chira or you [Rishan] or Precious [Adams] about struggles and they might be able to realise they’re not alone. But I also think it shouldn’t just be the default so yes sometimes every unpleasant detail of your struggle might be something you want to share, but I think it should also be ‘Can you interview this dancer about her creating this classical ballet role, or how brilliant she is, or how painful pointe work is, or any of the other questions you might ask of any of the Caucasian ballet dancers that we see interviewed. So I think improvement for me will be a time when certainly one of my dancers is interviewed about being a dancer and that’s the end of the interview. ‘What’s it like to be a dancer? The end’.

**Christopher:**Thanks so much. There is a long road ahead of all of us on this and it’s been really great just to be hearing your journeys so far. Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast Cassa and Rishan.