

## ***A Dialogue With Masters***

### ***Series 1, Episode 2***

#### ***Yinka Esi Graves***

**Show Description:** From emerging artists to legendary figures, this podcast gives voice to the African and Caribbean Diaspora. In each episode, Pawlet Brookes, CEO and Artistic Director of Serendipity, speaks to pioneering Black dancers, artists, choreographers, activists, academics and leaders within the arts and heritage sector.

**Episode Description:** Yinka Esi Graves is a Black British Flamenco dancer living and working in Seville. In one sense, Yinka brings the influences of the African diaspora to Spain and Flamenco, but in another, she is accessing an influence and connection that already exists. In this episode, we discuss the hidden African history in Flamenco and Yinka's new work, *The Disappearing Act*, which investigates questions of visibility and presence.

#### ***EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:***

**Pawlet:** Hello and welcome. You're listening to *A Dialogue With Masters*. I'm your host Pawlet Brookes, CEO and Artistic Director of Serendipity.

Serendipity is an internationally connected arts and heritage organisation actively changing the UK artistic and cultural landscape with a creative and inspiring high-quality programme. We foster new work from artists, run an annual dance festival called Let's Dance International Frontiers, coordinate Black History Month for Leicester, and run a year-round programme supporting artists and commemorating key events like Windrush Day.

My goal with this podcast is to centre Black dance and to give voice to the African Caribbean Diaspora through intimate conversations with pioneering Black dancers, artists, choreographers, activists, academics, and leaders within the arts and heritage sector.

Today, I'm speaking with Yinka Esi Graves, a Black-British Flamenco dancer living and working in Seville. Yinka brings the influences of the African diaspora to Spain and Flamenco, but really the influence is already there, and that hidden African heritage within Flamenco is something Yinka and I discuss in our conversation.

Yinka's newest work is a series of films called *The Disappearing Act*. In these films, she uses improvisation to explore sites....thresholds in Spain once connected to their Afro-Andalusian population and spaces of no return in Ghana. To each site an improvisation. The central question in *The Disappearing Act* is one of visibility and presence, a theme that dominates our conversation.

**Yinka Esi Graves:** Yeah, my name is Yinka Esi Graves. And I always find it hard to define exactly what I do. I mean I'm a flamenco dancer, but I would say that increasingly I'm sort of trying to find a form that speaks more to who I am in many different ways, but yeah, dance artist for sure.

**Pawlet:** So could you tell us about your journey into dance and in particular flamenco?

**Yinka:** Yeah, I think flamenco is really what made me become a professional dancer, let's say. I've danced since I was really young. In fact, my parents tell me that when I was four, we lived in Nicaragua, so in Central America. We went to Managua to a dance festival, a street festival. And when I came back, apparently I'd copied...I was like, "Oh, these people did this dance. And those people did that dance." And I think for them, that was when they decided, or they understood, that my body wanted to dance in a way. And so when we got back to England, I was put in ballet classes. I did jazz, I did Senegalese dance classes. I did loads of different forms of dancing. But then when I was 15—I think typical teenager—I kind of felt like, "Oh, you know, who wants to dance?" And left it behind. But then I found myself...I went to Cuba for a year when I was like 17 and 18, and I found myself in a dance room again in a dance class with this Afro Cuban dance

company. And then when I was at university, I was studying history of art, but there was a once a week, I think it was, there was a flamenco dance class and I just decided to join it. And I'd say that that's kind of where my relationship with flamenco began in a very kind of innocent way. I just went to the class—it was every Wednesday— as often as I could. That was my last year of university, but it really kind of grasped me. I didn't think at the time I knew...I had any inkling that I would kind of then gear my whole life towards learning flamenco. But that was definitely where the seed was born.

And when I decided to go to Barcelona through my teacher actually in England. And so I was there for a year with the intention of kind of continuing my life in the arts. I was meant to go to the States to do an internship at Studio Muse in Harlem, but for visa reasons, I ended up back in London and doing all sorts of things like doing radio production, working for an independent film festival, all sorts of stuff. And that's when I was like, actually I would really like to learn more flamenco. So that, that was nearly 11, no, that was 11 years ago. And that's when I decided that I needed this to go to Spain. So that's where it started. And when I moved it was just in this kind of like crazy woman way. Like, "Oh, that'd be really nice to learn." And here I am, you know,

**Pawlet:** So given that you, , had these different dance influences, can you tell me about the influence of the African diaspora in Spain and in particular on the culture of flamenco? Because you know what, what you've done is you've brought Africa to Spain, but I think in terms of its history, it was already there.

**Yinka:** Absolutely. Yeah. I mean it's kind of interesting because, in a way, the journey that my body's gone on since it was young has perhaps been a reflection of that. So, you know, that festival I mentioned was in an area in Bluefields, which is where the Black community in Nicaragua live. There are a lot of people who are...even though it's a Spanish speaking country, they're very much like the Caribbean people who lived in Jamaica and so forth in terms of cultural expression and so on. In Cuba it was the same thing. I was doing Afro Cuban dancing. And I think when I came to flamenco, I wasn't aware of it at the time, but it's almost as if I kind of feel like, wow, this has been this kind of journey that my body's taken me on.

And it took me coming to Seville, sort of south of Spain to really, become in contact with that because the time I'd spent in Barcelona and Madrid, you know, those aren't really the sites that flamenco is known to have been born in. But the

minute you come down into the south and you're in spaces like Seville and Cádiz, the makeup of the city, even though you can't physically see it anymore, in terms of the Black presence...but the way flamenco is lived is much more present. So in a sense, my need to get closer to that inadvertently brought me closer to where once upon a time there had been a quite important African population.

So when I recently just moved to Spain, to Seville, sorry...I met Miguel Rosales....well I was called actually to go and dance on a shoot.And they actually were looking, they were researching the presence of the African population here. So I think for me this has been something that maybe was subconsciously present. or I know that that's always what's attracted me in terms of my body really connecting to flamenco. But suddenly I came across and was in front of the proof that, between the 15th and 19th century, up to 15% of the population in cities like Seville and Cádiz were either Black or mixed because of the slave trade. You think of London nowadays...Seville, the south of Spain was probably one of the most diverse spaces in Europe at the time, very much like somewhere like London or Paris. And if you think of all the musical genres that are born in those spaces, flamenco is exactly that. You know, it's the late 19th century in urban spaces and the kind of coming together of all these peoples in a way produces what we now know as flamenco.

**Pawlet:** We talk about ancestral retentions, ancestral retentions that we carry. We carry histories in our body. And so in a sense you're talking about these histories and these hidden histories that are carried within our bodies, which is why we have this, I said this really sort of juxtaposition of where it's appropriation and appreciation and the two things have been assimilated, but assimilated into what now seems to be the host culture where, but yet it's also, it's been dormant in African cultures. Cause it's in your body but you're not Spanish.

**Yinka:** Absolutely. I mean, I think there are quite a few things going on. It's interesting because the work I'm currently making is really around that, around the act of unseeing in a way, the way a lot of things are not looked at properly or they're skewed, the vision is skewed in some way. Now I suppose historically Spain's got a very specific history, in that, you know, it lived through over 40 years of dictatorship in the 20th century. And I think through that process, lots of things have been...you know, not only to do with the Black presence, but other

aspects of its history have been reconstrued, and a lot of things have been quite obviously hidden in a way.

And I think with flamenco, it's very difficult because there's no question that the main sort of porters of the art form have been people in the Gypsy community...not just the Gypsies as an ethnicity, but also as a social class, different spaces that you know, those communities occupied, if that makes sense.

There is, there isn't much of a Black population that has descended from the times that I'm mentioning. And there's a question as to whether in a way that they, they are invisibilized within the Gypsy community so that a lot of the people who identify as Gypsy...and I use that as opposed to Roma because in Spain it's very specific and they themselves speak of themselves as Gypsies with as much pride as they should have in using that word. And so it's very difficult in a sense because I think often it's maybe confused when we say that there are African roots in flamenco...in thinking that maybe the first people were African and then people appropriated it. It's more that they were there, even though a lot of the people who then performed it might not necessarily have been African themselves, but a lot of the dancers that a lot of the African...let's say they were used in a lot of religious processions and so on. Those were definitely cons ed into popular culture, and rhythms and so on that made their way into the kind of foundations of what flamenco is.

It's a tough one. Coming back to your question of sort of cultural appropriation. You know, I am foreign, there's no question that I'm not from Spain. And so I think before I understood this history, before I understood the complexity of the fabric of flamenco, I myself had this sense of like, "Why am I even doing this...this isn't, this has got nothing to do with me." And then I suppose coming round to the fact that actually it has more to do with me than one might think has in general made it quite difficult to speak of appropriation. Which angle can we look at it from? Because to many people I'm appropriating if they're not aware of the actual...you know.

**Pawlet:** Given that, we're now in a place in Europe, we're starting to hear more about new concepts and new things like new Europeans or Afro European. What do you think about this, which starts to then legitimize this relationship that you've

been talking about in terms of a hidden history, a hidden African history within the flamenco dance?

**Yinka:** Mm, absolutely. Yeah. It's so complex in the sense that, you know, coming back to the dictatorship as well, flamenco itself is then stuck into this very stereotypical notion of what a Gypsy is as well, you know, in terms of how one should dress and so on and so forth. And so it's so strange because then flamenco becomes this example, even stereotypical othering of Gypsy people as well. Even though not everybody who performs it is necessarily ethnically a Gypsy. So it's really confused and confusing. I think there's a lot at play within flamenco in and of itself because of the myths that have been built around it. And because it's been used as a sort of a symbol for something. It's almost turned itself into something that's two dimensional when it's much more...it's like a prism that's full of so many different things

So that often plays within itself in flamenco too, that there's a lot to do with kind of a repeating, playing on a stereotype in and of itself. And I think for me, there's always been this interest in connecting to a deeper sense of what is held within the art form because it's so huge, it's so vast, it's full of so many different styles, different rhythms, and different ways of expressing it that it's almost like if you do stay on the surface level– the level, which is easier to appropriate, let's say–then you're, you're not actually really connecting to the depth of the form in and of itself.

**Pawlet:** So how do you, so how do you reclaim that as a Black British dancer in Spain?

**Yinka** From the 15th century.... you know, ...we speak about globalization now, but that's when the world started becoming global as such. And so I feel like with or without our physical presence within Europe, Africa and Africans have had everything to do with Europe since, you know, even before the 15th century. Now talking a bit because we're more visible in spaces, is really denying and ignoring the fact that actually we are as much a part of.. and I also sometimes object to it being sort of just "our history"...this is everybody's history. You know, I think of the film [film name], that is about Spanish history and this part of Spanish history involves African descendants, but it's not just...it's always sort of relegated as if something just only to do with those of us who are African descendants when it's

actually intrinsic to the development of, of Europe in every way, shape, and form economically, , you know, culturally and so on and so forth.

And then, you know, then you also historically know that, you know, there were like different...I don't know which world groups actually right now, but from West Africa who, you know, were, would go hunting with the Kings of Portugal back in the 15th century and 16th century. So I think that communication has been going on forever and it's a shame for us to only talk about that here now.

And that's something that I think flamenco has really taught me is how far back we need to go to understand the present and this idea of past-present, which definitely conditions our existence as African descendants across the, across the globe is that, you know, all these things that happened 500 years ago are still present, are still influencing where and who we are now, so I definitely see that in, in this idea.

**Pawlet:** Where do you sit because if you think, we have attitudes towards Black dancers doing ballet. Do you have attitudes towards Black dancers doing flamenco?

**Yinka:** I think now I find myself making works to try and understand it more than anything. I think I'm somebody who is comforted by the idea of complexity. I think often there's an attempt to simplify things to speak of one root. And for me Flamenco is a clear example of the idea that things are sort of woven together. So these stories that try and make things whole...to me are false in a way. And so I think a lot of my work is really just about unpiecing that, and it doesn't make sense in a way, but, it's constantly a question opens a question, and I feel that I'm constantly like opening middle holes, you know, making them bigger and bigger and bigger and making space space in them. I think that's why I also find it hard to define things because I don't know how things can be defined when for me, nothing is just one thing.

**Pawlet:** Yes. Yeah. Yeah. What do they imply? What do they mean? How, how do we change that? What is understood? Are you professional, are you not professional?

**Yinka:** And what do those attitudes imply? I think the simple fact of existing is also helping those perspectives change in a way. And I've definitely seen the last few years of my career change considerably...I can consider myself professional, let's say, because of the work that I have been able to do in a way. And increasingly, I

suppose I'm like not caring anymore what people think. I think when I started I was so concerned because I always felt—and I always often was—the odd one in the room and people didn't expect to see me performing and all these sorts of things.

But as I understand more why I'm dancing, it's almost that knowledge that you're talking about in the body. You know, I definitely know that my body is like the smartest thing of me, you know, beyond the brain that's saying it. It's almost like it knew where it was going before, before I did. And so, you know, staying connected to that and staying true to that enables me to just keep doing what I have to do, if that makes sense. So that doesn't mean that it's necessarily easy, but it means that increasingly I'm having to learn how to not mind what people might think or might not think. And it's also asking me to be less judgmental as well of those things yet again that make us think like, "Oh, this shouldn't be done. This shouldn't be, you know, these people shouldn't do that." And I think it really depends on what the intention is, if that makes sense.

**Pawlet:** Yeah. Because there's different communities terms of community as audience and audience in Spain, audience in Britain, what do they think? And there's communities as a professional artist, dancer, practitioner sitting alongside other flamenco dancers, but as a Black British female dancer. So in terms of what do people think, what do those different communities think, those different audiences, those different sets of groups of people. And as you said, does it matter?

**Yinka:** When I started I was comparing myself to the general flamenco community, where all I could feel was inadequate. And the more I have endeavored in kind of understanding what my body wants in flamenco or why my body came to dance flamenco, the less I am trying to look like the rest of the community. So in the sense of the more I'm finding my own voice, which in a strange way also allows me to have a place because you know, sometimes I, you know, I see this as a long journey. So sometimes I wonder whether I will even end up doing, you know, let's say traditional flamenco, even I have to say, I have so much love for traditional flamenco...it's the most amazing thing ever, it's just incredible.

But maybe that isn't where I sit. I've actually been very lucky because I think that that appreciation, which, which I suppose has happened quite early on in my

career, let's say, has really enabled me to take up other spaces as well. And so I find myself doing things, you know, working with Usher, for example, a contemporary dancer, you know, that's not a traditional flamenco thing to do. I mean there is also a contemporary flamenco scene as well. And I suppose on one level I'm perhaps more connected to that as well. But I feel like as I'm saying, I myself feel myself opening up space for myself in a way, opening up space for my own understanding of it. And I feel like that in and of itself is creating a community. You know, I think we saw that with the film...I traveled quite a bit with it and it's so wonderful being received in different places all over the world, particularly in the Americas who I suppose are, you know, like diasporic peoples of not only African descendants but also Europeans who are now on the other side in this world as it was remade, you know, post 1492.

**Pawlet:** Your current project, *Disappearing Act*, it's a work in progress, but it's all the elements of the conversation that we've had, I think in terms of the disappearing act is finding that voice. Could you just tell us a little bit about the project

**Yinka:**

In *The Disappearing Act*, which will become a stage piece, I think I'm really speaking to this idea of unseen and seen, as I was saying before, so the sense of how is it that I can be in this space and there's no sense of recognition of what this actually is. For me, it starts with this bridge in Seville, which I used to cross often to go to one of my dance classes and always had the sense that like, my body was like saying to me that, okay, that I have people in this water beneath the bridge. And later on I found out that it was the Puerto de Cuba, which is where many of the ships coming from Africa came and where a lot of slaves were disembarked and so on.

And so to me that was like, okay, this is so interesting. There's no plaque there. There's nothing to tell you that that was the case. But somehow this was something that my body knew. For me, I relate that to the fact that the more, you know, I've had experiences of working in things, I'm about to do this show once where I had to wear like a wig. And I just found it so funny because the minute I did that, so like a straight wig, suddenly I was present. Suddenly I was like visible.

Suddenly all these guys were looking at me and all these things and it just really made me wonder what are the things that we go through to actually be seen.

The films are a kind of a beginning point where I really wanted to engage with different spaces and different historical spaces to allow my body to speak to them, let's say, to see what I could gather. Again, coming to the sense that the body, as you were saying, has this knowledge that maybe we're not even aware of. And so for me, that's a way of starting, of starting to build a conversation around this idea of even camouflage, of like how we as a people of African descendents are constantly employing these acts of like how to be present or how not to, because we're always having to work through this sense of visibility and invisibility.

**Pawlet:** Given this thing about visible and invisible, how do you envisage the evolution and the future of flamenco with a Black presence?

**Yinka** That's a very interesting question.

**Pawlet:** I've changed the question. The question wasn't that complex. But I couldn't help myself.

**Yinka:** What I have to say is that I know that...and I think maybe it's thanks to the film...it's been seen quite a lot here...that at least there's an acknowledgement now. So I open pages like linked to different like flamenco houses, and suddenly, you know, I see...so I see that they mentioned the Morrish, the Jewish, obviously the Castilian, and the Gypsy presence, but they also mentioned the African presence, which is a huge step. That's not to say that there aren't a lot of people in the community who knew that already, but that wasn't something that was what was generally shared and spoken about, and I also just now I feel like there are more and more Black people coming to learn flamenco. So I'm sure the scene will look quite different in like 20 years.

I've had a friend also who works in Mexico and I think she was teaching in Ecuador, and she had a young Black girl in her class. She was teaching flamenco and her mother, I think the girl's mom was like, oh, well no, you know, this isn't a dance for young black girls. And so she showed her one of my videos and you know, and that was very beautiful to me to, to think that it's sort of like also just helping to help shift what possibilities are, you know, and I think that's why it's so

important being present, because it's not because it's not there, that it isn't there, which again is what, for me, *The Disappearing Act* is about.. it's like just cause you can't see it...that it's not there.

But I have to say though, that in 1900 there's a film, one of the first images of flamenco that was filmed by the Lumiere brothers in France. So this was in one of those international fairs that they had. They had a Quadro flamenco. So like a flamenco set. I think there were like two dancers and a musician as you see today, and one of the dancers is actually a Black man who's been identified as a [name] and for me I'm like, that's amazing. This is 1900. The year is 1900. They've chosen a flamenco set and one of the dancers is actually Black. I first saw this image at a conference in Seville. Nobody even noticed the man was Black,...he was named as my [name] who's a very well known teacher from that period in Seville. But now people have actually investigated and that teacher wasn't even there. This person is [Black man's name]. And I just, for me, I'm like, this is amazing. This man was there as an example of flamenco to France. There's a Black person there. Nobody's even seeing it as that, nowadays people reading it aren't even seeing him as Black. So for me it just re-enters that whole thing. So while one level, I'm like, "Oh, you know, you know, maybe things will change." Maybe they won't, because it's about how we see, right. It's about how we perceive things.

**Pawlet:**

So it's also about being visible, but simultaneously being invisible. How do you see your future? Not just being tagged as a flamenco dancer, but a dancer for catalyst for change?

**Yinka** Yeah, now that we're in this period of sort of pause...you know, I can't continue my practice in the same way. I can't get to the studio and so on. It is allowing me to sort of try and think beyond quite a lot. You know, there's a lot of time just surviving, right? Just being like, okay, I've got to do this, I want to do that. And I suppose in that, it's just maintaining my curiosity that the questions keep coming up, and having the privilege to kind of explore them. I think working with England, and I say that because there are more opportunities to maybe... I

think there is this kind of critical element, as in a positive critical element in England that I recognize in my way of questioning and my way of working. And so for me it's also important to be able to continue that conversation. And you know, I do a lot of work in England because obviously I'm British, but I feel like I'm also speaking to my community in England as well, if that makes sense, which I don't have here in the same way.

**Pawlet:** I think that's a very important question because I think, you know, as English as a Black British, you know, we're on this island and we've now created Brexit. But the reality for us as a people is that we need to be connected. And through you being in Spain, it allows that dialogue to continue. And that connection and that bridge you talked about, you know, the bridge to Cuba, the bridge to Spain and those bridges are really, really important while we have people who cross those bridges and take people with them and create that movement of people. And so it's great that you can speak to the community in England, in the UK, but it's important that we get that cross-fertilization happening. So we keep that relationship going, because there's thousands of Black people, hundreds of thousands of Black people in Spain, and we need to make them more visible.

**Yinka:** Totally, and Latin America. I genuinely feel also that we are people who have always been traveling in a way, you know, whether it's forced or not, but it seems so, so strange to kind of close ourselves off in that way. And yeah, you know, for me there's a big question around Englishness anyway because it's like, well, we are British, but we also connected to these other places. Breaking that connection I think for me, it's just false.

**Pawlet:** Okay. Well, that note, I need to say a big, big thank you for your time, for your wisdom, for your experience, and sharing it with us.

**Yinka:** Thank you so much, Pawlet. I appreciate it so much and it's a pleasure to speak to you.

**Pawlet:** As I said to Yinka, dancers like her create bridges across political and geographical barriers, bridges that others can use to foster dialogue and cross-fertilization across the African Diaspora.

It's encouraging to see artists like Yinka casting doubt onto the artistic barriers and divisions we take for granted and asking provocative questions about appropriation, ownership, influence, and visibility.

Yinka will be appearing at Let's Dance International Frontiers 2021 in Autograph. You can find out more about that event by visiting our website, [serendipity hyphen uk dot com](http://serendipityhyphenuk.com). You can also find her online, on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as Yinka Esi Graves.

For more content, including Yinka's Work in Progress short films for The Disappearing Act, and to learn more about how Serendipity is changing the face of what we mean when we look at dance, join Serendipity Connect, our membership scheme giving exclusive access to an international network for dancers, artists and arts professionals. Learn more about Serendipity Connect at [serendipity-uk.com/connect](http://serendipity-uk.com/connect).

This episode was edited and produced for Serendipity by Hannah Hethmon at Better Lemon Creative Audio, with research by Mistura Allison, Amy Grain and Francesca Vaney.