

A Dialogue With Masters

Series 1, Episode 1

Thomas Prestø

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:

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Pawlet Brookes: 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 choreographer Thomas Prestø, the founder and artistic director of Tabanka Dance Ensemble in Oslo, Norway, and the creator of Talawa Technique.

I wanted to hear directly from Thomas about his groundbreaking work in notation around Black dance and the Talawa Technique, a method of codifying African Caribbean dance styles.

Thomas' work with notation makes Black dance accessible, and codifying Black dance styles is incredibly important, as it is something we rarely see in the mainstream.

The African Caribbean community has been instrumental to the birth of most dance styles and techniques that we see today, and we need to recognise the pioneers in the wings who are not acknowledged by the mainstream.

Well, I think that's enough introduction from me. Here's my conversation with Thomas Prestø about Tabanka Dance Ensemble and the Talawa Technique.

Pawlet: Let's start at the beginning, Thomas. And could you tell me about how and when you learnt to dance?

Thomas: can tell you when I realized that I couldn't dance. Um, I was living with my grandfather. Ge is originally a Trinidadian, so I was living with him in Barcelona, and the Calypsonians, the mighty Sparrow was coming to Barcelona and I must've been around, I don't know, 11, I think at the time. And I was super excited cause I got to join and I had the time of my life, I was dancing Calypso and enjoying myself. And then we reached home and the door closed, and my grandfather says, "What was that? Our family is known for rhythm and style, and you have none. It's like Norway kick up in your ass." So that was the moment I realized that apparently by Caribbean standards I couldn't dance. And my grandfather said to himself and my two aunts as my dance teachers, so my grandfather was actually my first dance teacher and a very good one who taught me the traditional dances of Trinidad and Tobago with a very anatomical approach cause he's a medical doctor. He even brought these two little metal rods, so he would electrically shock the muscle he wanted me to use in order to achieve various effects on the body. So...but I'm quite grateful cause I'm able to do quite minute and very detailed trembles and shakes and so on because of it. And it's also the foundation of the technique.

Pawlet: Caribbean dance gives you that though, doesn't it? Because it allows you to play with rhythm, play with music, and just play in terms of how one can move your body. So given that your grandfather used to prod you and taught you to dance, how did that then develop into this style and technique? Tell us a little bit about Talawa Technique. How did that then evolve?

Thomas: Well, I think that that was the beginning. My grandfather was the beginning of the technique he had already done into the culture and transmitted that to me. So I think part of the reason why the technique is this mix of mythology, folkloric, and deep cultural understanding with a firm understanding of anatomy, and the, the forces that play on the body. I really have to credit him. And I think because that was my entry as I started to continue taking classes and delving deeper, an increasing frustration of mine was very often the lack of specificity that was to be found in classes. A lot of the times it was just about having fun and going across the floor or sometimes it was, it was also about getting the movement correctly or getting a high level of virtuosity. But the teachers, they were able to show but were not able to necessarily explain.

Pawlet: Were these classes Black dance, were they ballet, what were these classes that you went to?

Thomas: Oh, well I've done it all. I have to say I've done it all. I've done ballet, I've done Horton, I've done Graham, I've done Limón, I've done Matt Mattox, I've done Luigi. But I'm now speaking about specifically black dance. That has always, that was my first love and it will be my last lap. I am not seeking divorce anytime soon.

Pawlet: So given that you're not seeking divorce, and this is your great passion, what's been the biggest challenge in creating this technique?

Thomas: It was making sure to create it on the basis of its own logic. So building it from the foundation up. Several techniques that exist out there are what I would call "techniques of substitution." So very often, you took Graham technique as a base and you would substitute or add on some elements of a Caribbean motif or movement, while I felt it was necessary to really build it from the ground up. So everything from the way you strengthen your body to the way you stretch is based on the logic of the movement itself and what you're going to do. So it's polycentric and poly-rhythmical. Um, it has gone through quite thoroughly by an orthopedic doctor and also to two osteopaths. So it's based on knowledge and science, but really also based on the logic of the form itself.

Pawlet: So given the logic, the science, and the inner sense then that this technique is codified and it has like mathematical properties. Tell me a little bit more about the codifications of it and the maths involved within it.

Thomas: Well, I'm happy you mentioned that because we started with 287 dances and we have to develop a notation system to try to note down what was the body doing polycentrally in relation to itself. So meaning actually being able to capture when the hand is there, where's the chest, where's the hip, where they are in interrelationship to each other, and what type of grounding feeling does the movement have. So we developed a notation system, which other than the Greenotation system, there's not really any other notation system that has successfully been able to capture polycentric movement and also poly-rhythm. Ours is based on algebra, because that makes it possible to multiply something almost indefinitely within the parentheses, so into itself. So it allows you to capture quite a lot of information about a singular movement or a moment in time. This was fed through a computer after we had notated these 287 dances. So we're talking some years of work. And the computer was able to feed back to us what coincided, what was the most common paths of movement, which combinations of arms and hips, for example, happen together or stances with various rotations. So based on this, 81 African dancers were chosen and 56 Caribbean and circum-Caribbean dancers were chosen, and then there was a selection of movements and so on. So the result of this is 32 parallel positions of the arms, which for those who are good in maths, gives the potential for 1024 possible if you separate left and right, but then you also have all the paths that they will travel. You have seven major levels of isolation in the torso and you have 15 stances of the feet. So that forms the basis.

Pawlet: Given this detail...you normally...when one thinks about notation, one thinks about ballet, and here we have now an African Caribbean technique. Can you tell me about the positive and negative feedback you've had in terms of getting this technique acknowledged or people being aware of it?

Thomas: Well, the feedback has actually been quite predominantly positive for anyone who experiences it, because it has a smooth experience cause there's a pedagogy attached to it. It has been more negative in the sense that it's been a heavy thing to lift that branding that African and Caribbean dance has. So the established forms—jazz, modern ballet and so on—have decided that ballet is the basis of old technique of all dances. So you will get a lot of pushback once you try to assert that African and Caribbean dance is also technical. But anyone who has

seen the technique demonstrated, or have seen the dancers who are trained in it, find themselves coming up short if they try to argue that it is not technical. And what I think is what the positive feedback we get is that we've been able to get something which is possible to train, impossible to drill, but which does not erase individuality and does not erase all those choices that improvisation-based dance gives.

Pawlet: So given that Talawa Technique then is respected amongst some elders and other African Caribbean choreographers and dancers, how do you feel about this, this recognition amongst your peers, but also how do you feel about giving a voice to it in terms of dance ecology worldwide?

Thomas: I am extremely humbled and pleased that so many of my peers and also my elders has found it useful. There's a language related to it. A lot of them are saying that they're so happy that this language exists, that it has made their life easier. I thought I would meet a lot of resentment or pushback or this is not how it's supposed to be or you're breaking tradition, and the experience has been quite opposite, and that has been quite a joy.

I was going through yesterday our Facebook, cause we have quite a large following. And it was really interesting to, to see like some of the technical videos and for example, a video of just a phrase from the technique has been shared 3,600 times. And when people share on Facebook, you're able to see who shares. And it was quite humbling to see that most of the people who were sharing were teachers of Africana dance form who were tagging their students and telling their students to look at it and look at what the bent knee does to the body and so on. So I'm very pleased with that.

And I noticed that in general, I think African dance is becoming more and more respected. I know we've said that multiple times before, but there's something about reaching a level of critical mass. And there's something about the amount of people who are sharing Africana forms on Twitter, on TikTok and so on. Granted, a lot of it is commercial. But it still does something with the acknowledgement that it definitely is an aesthetic and dance forms to be reckoned with.

Pawlet: But how do we get it into our conservatoires? How do we get Talawa Technique, how do we get dance of the African Diaspora into our dance conservatoires as well, because the landscape is changing in terms of people going to attend and learn dance. So rather than just learning from Facebook, from TikTok, how do we get it into our conservatoires? What's been the battles for you

in terms of someone from Caribbean heritage living in Norway? What are the barriers to getting this technique out there?

Thomas: Well from the get go, it has been this arrogance, this assertion that nothing that comes from Africa or from Black people can be technical. And that what ballet has done and white people have done is to take the forms of the Black body like jazz, and then they have discipline, they have given a shape and form an intention because you know, the black body only reacts. It does not move with intelligence. So really showing and arguing that African dance and Black dance and Caribbean dance is intelligent at a very high level because you have to be able to process a lot of information very quickly and respond to it. So it's a very intelligent, highly, communicative aesthetic and form in its space. So that has been part of the struggle. What is interesting to me is that I experience that we are getting more and more demand, probably because we are a fully qualified technique that already has solved a lot of the issues of how do you grade, how do you assess, how do you progress during a course, how does it fit into a semester? We have sold all of those things from before, but also as schools are finding themselves increasingly struggling to get people to sign up. So I think because there's so many alternatives now and a lot of the dancers that we see on TV and we even see on stages do not come out of the conservatoires. So the conservatoires are very quickly finding that they have to change the curriculum. They have to do things to become more relevant because they are, they are behind the times. And the thing about Africana dance and Caribbean dance is that it's always of the times. It's always around relevant. And it's the only way for a dancer today to be competitive. If you do not dance any African dance from, I mean salsa, no samba, no merengue, no rhumba, no Afro Cubam, no hip hop, no house. If you have none of these references, you're not that relevant anymore. That's the reality. And that's what we need to understand. We have something that they need, not the other way around.

Pawlet: So how do you feel your heritage then has influenced your practice? You've reeled off a number of African and Caribbean dance styles. How has your heritage impacted on your voice in terms of dance?

Thomas: I think I've been very blessed because I have, well I have this constant, which I call poly-diasporic, so to be of multiple diasporas. I have African American and the Norwegian on one side, that's my father's side, and I'm Afro Caribbean and Norwegian on the other side. And also the Caribbean side of the family are, like many Caribbean families, quite mixed. So I have uncles or a half Jamaican, half

Trinidadian, they're a mix of many different islands. And here in Norway, there's not that many Anglophone Caribbeans. So you found yourself, if you looked for Black community, you found yourself predominantly fraternizing with West Africans: Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia, and then later on Congolese and Southern Africans came, et cetera. So I grew up very pan-African in a sense, and that has really helped me formulate the technique because nothing is more natural to me, then the mixing of Black life, let me call it that. Let me phrase it that way. And I grew up then instantly understanding that connection cause I as a Black Caribbean had no problem communicating with the Ghanaian or the Nigerian, and we would [???] or like kiss our teeth and mhm and we would know exactly what each other meant. And when they were speaking pigeon I would understand them. And when I spoke Patois, they would understand me and our dance language is very similar. It's sometimes more understanding of context and accent than that it is a completely foreign language, because it's not a completely foreign language.

Pawlet: So this pan-African vision, how's that been part of the formation of Tabanka Dance Ensemble, what role has that played?

Thomas: Quite a huge one. In the company now, we don't have two company members who have the same national background. So we have approximately 15 nations represented. And if you would go to ethnic origin or tribe...I don't really like that word, but if you would use that term, it's even wider. So it's quite central, and that probably because Norway is a very predominantly white country and there's quite a small Black community, you have this natural pan-Africanism that has evolved. And where I really notice that is sometimes when I travel for example to America, pan-Africanism feels very constructed. It feels very contrived. It's a goal that one aspires to, but one would claim a pan-African space where there would be nobody from Africa in the room, for example.

And it does something with..it becomes an image becomes a glossy image, but it doesn't have the texture of the reality of it. I believe that if I should say that there's any advantage because...and I choose to use that word because you know, being so few as we are here, we have to say that there must be some advantage somewhere. So I would say that the advantage is that you grew up in a pan African reality, uh, and where it's a necessity so you have to make it work. Your existence depends on your ability to make a pan-African space work. So we had a necessity, and we had to make a pan- African space work and that has been central in both

the creation of the company, but also the creation of the technique because that has been a pan-African functional space has been the norm for us.

Pawlet: Making that pan-African space work, how does that impact in terms of white audiences, in terms of who's viewing the work and their expectations? Cause you've got pan-African company on stage and one's assuming you've got a predominantly white audience, how does that work?

Thomas: It's been interesting. You really have to develop certain practices for how do you flip the power balance of the room because in [????] stage, it's very often the audience in an amphi above the stage looking down on you, and to have hundreds of white people looking down at you as a Black performer, as you are trying to achieve subjectivity and representing yourself on stage, you have to be quite powerful to flip that back. But our traditions are really strong and if there's anything, especially as a Caribbean you know how to do is how to resist the white gaze. So we've found ways to flip that gaze back and to colonize the room so that they are our guests, but we are the owners of the house when we perform. So that has been quite interesting to really look artistically at how do you do that as a practice and how do you, how are you able to create that space, which makes them aware that they are now the ones entering and being invited into something. And a lot of them say that the first time they come, they're a little bit unsure of how to behave because we have the, we informed the audiences that they can make noise, that they can hoot, that they can laugh, that they can clap. We've even had audiences ask for a pull up and, and we actually did it. We pulled the song up. It was a Bob Marley song, and we did the entire choreography again in the middle of the show and then moved on. And a lot of white audiences are not used to that type of dynamic display of call and response. But what it does is that even if 30% of the audience is black and 70 is white, it can still become a Black space. So we've really looked at ways to do that. But, and also because several of us, like I mentioned, I've mixed heritage, some of the other members, as in Black/white, we're not hostile, so it is quite a safe space for everyone. We just make it clear that in this mansion you follow the mansion's rules and if you don't know what they are, then you pay attention. And I think it's, but the audience have been appreciative. The white audience has come and said that they really enjoy the difference in spectatorship and there's a learning process because they are realizing that all the Black people in the room are laughing. So there they are

catching on that there's something that they're not catching. And as they..some of them have followed us for years and they are starting to catch that humor and it says that it enriches their musical experience because they are now catching some of the hidden references in the music. So they are finding that Black aesthetics in general is becoming more three and four dimensional to them and the image is not as flat.

[Musical interlude/transition]

Pawlet: So, in terms of Black dance then, we are we now, where do you see us now?

Thomas: We're in a very dangerous space, I would say. In some ways, like I said, there's a spread that is happening. We can fool ourselves and think that we are breaking through like never before. And for example, to use a vogue as an example, vogue has believed that for probably five rounds. We're also in a space where we're being appropriated quicker and faster and more than ever before. We're also being simplified and dumbed down in order to get views, in order for people to come to class. And we're still selling this idea that anyone can do African Caribbean dance. And yes, there are forms of African and Caribbean dance that everyone can do, but they're also very virtuous forms, which you have to be trained at a very high level in order to be able to execute. So we still really need to communicate that there are many levels to our dance and that our dance forms are extremely eclectic and wide in its expression. We have to communicate that professionalism is still something that is necessary. You can't do a six weeks course and then think you can teach, while in ballet or other forms you would be doing it for a good seven years before you...almost before you really perform it. So there's something about understanding that on the professional level, African dance is probably more complex and even harder to capture technically if you want to be a dancer who, who has mastered more than one form because there's so many forms and so much aesthetic material.

Pawlet: And do you not think that's about how we've packaged dance of the African and Caribbean Diaspora, how we've only gone for the commercial elements, the quick sexy elements of it rather than the more considered, professional artistic side of it in terms of how, how we're presented?

Thomas: It's a multiple thing, because our forms resist easy categorization. So some of our forms can be both sacred, ritualistic, artistic, and social at the same time. The same dance form can have all those functions. It just has to do with the mode or the level that you're performing or engaging in it at or the space that

you're doing it in. So yes, it has to do with packaging, but it also has to do with understanding. It has to do with a colonial history that has to do with that the Black body itself was bought and sold. And a continuation of that now is that anything that comes from the Black body can be bought and sold, people believe that they can buy themselves into Blackness and, and that, that's part of the problem. And just to make that last point, the reason I said scary is because we've now hit a point where a lot of our knowledge is quickly dying. So we have an entire generation of elders who have not passed on their practices and a lot of the practices, unless we do something radically now, we will lose a lot of our knowledge because the chain has been broken. And it's interesting the chains that even slavery could not break on now quickly being broken by tourism and commercialism.

Pawlet: So what does the future hold?

Thomas: Nothing but greatness! Cause you know, we will do what we need to do, and make sure that we get the information, and we codify it and we create archives which are accessible and we create matrices, which allow people to enter in and decode the archive. That's what we're doing. That's also what technique does, it's a way for both codifying and decoding knowledge and information about how to create meaning and how to create art and how to, to play with these ancestral forms. Our forms are great to compare to contemporary dance. In contemporary dance, you sometimes have collectives of let's say 20 people who have invested in a specific practice or a specific form. If you take for example, sabar as an example, you have an entire nation that has invested in rhythms and practices and movement for multiple generations. And we need to start to acknowledge the fact that we have entire nations that have for multiple generations invested in and investigated practices, that really means there's a lot of information packed there. And it's amazing what you can unpack if you give it a little bit of attention and a little bit of effort.

Pawlet: So Thomas, any final words or thoughts or things you'd like to say about Talawa Technique and Tabanka Dance Ensemble.

Well catch us if you can, in any way possible. We hope to share our knowledge and our practices and what we've been able to, to do with as many people as possible. We call Talawa Technique a key technique because it's designed to unlock the body. It's designed to give you knowledge about your own body and

knowledge on how to do the various pulses, undulations, vibrations, shakes and trembles and paths and ways of moving, which will then allow you to engage with multiple forms. So it doesn't necessarily teach you all the forms of African and Caribbean dance. But it teaches you an understanding and a basis which will make it possible for you to deconstruct what you're learning or seeing and reconstruct on your own body.

And we hope that a lot of people will take that basis, cause it really saves you years of trouble and use that to try to recapture as much of our practices as possible so that we can actually start to get to where we are evolving the forms. Because if we really take the time and study the videos at what level, let's say the Nicholas Brothers were at or Tip Tap Toe, and then you see what we are doing now rhythmically, you will see that we've had a negative curve. So I think it's really important for us to really be intelligent about how we're training the next generation so that they can reach the level where they are actually evolving and advancing our genres rather than playing at the surface of them.

[Musical transition]

Pawlet:

Powerful insight from Thomas Prestø. I hope you were as inspired and refreshed in your artistic practice as I was from this conversation.

It's so important to hear from the actual person, the creator, behind a piece of work... rather than hearing the story second hand. Talawa Technique and the work of notation and codification of Black dance is such a relevant subject, so we're extremely grateful to Thomas for sharing his time and wisdom with us here at Serendipity for the podcast.

If you take just one thing away from this episode, I hope it is a new or renewed knowledge of the fact that African Caribbean dance has contributed to, and continues to contribute to the dance ecology, and that it is essential to the development of dance today and in the future. It should not be seen as peripheral when we talk about contemporary dance, and it is critical that we centre Black dance so it can be as fully valued and appreciated as it deserves.

To learn more about Thomas's work and the Talawa Technique, we recommend Thomas' contribution to the book *Black Dance: A Contemporary Voice*, available in paperback and ebook formats from our website, serendipity-uk.com.

Thomas will be leading a workshop as part of the Let's Dance International Frontiers Finale this October. Again, all details for that are on our website, [serendipity hyphen uk.com](http://serendipity-hyphen-uk.com)

For more content 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.

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.