

A Dialogue With Masters

Series 1, Episode 3

Akeim Toussaint Buck

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: Akeim Toussaint Buck is an interdisciplinary performer and maker who works across dance, song, and spoken word. Akeim's work looks at identities and diversities in Britain and how an individual can navigate questions of layered identity. In this episode, Akeim discusses the motivation and thinking behind his latest work, *Windows of Displacement*, a piece that draws on contexts of imperialism, colonialism and displacement to create a story of the past, present, and future of humanity.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:

INTRO

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 Akeim Toussaint Buck. Akeim is an interdisciplinary performer and maker who works across dance, song, and spoken word as Toussaint to Move. Born in Jamaica and raised in England...Akeim's work looks at identities and diversities in Britain and how an individual can navigate questions of layered identity.

As with all our guests in this series, Akeim and I spoke remotely from our homes during the coronavirus lockdown. You'll hear his family in the background at times through our interview, which is fitting considering our discussion of the complexity of identities and roles. Akeim also shared with me some of the motivation and thinking behind his latest work, *Windows of Displacement*, a piece that draws on contexts of imperialism, colonialism and displacement to create a story of the past, present and future of humanity.

Akeim Toussaint Buck: My name is Akeim Toussaint Buck. I am a dance artist, which encompasses creating choreography, movement directing, and teaching. I'm also a beatboxer and a poet. Yeah. I create work under the name Toussaint to Move.

Pawlet Brookes: Wonderful. So could you just tell me a little bit about the piece, *Symbiosis*?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: So the piece is an exploration of the sense of two siblings who are exploring the dichotomy of I guess a sense of freedom and oppression. So a sense that we've come so far and we've gained so much, but still there are these things around us. And actually then there's a third party who is the musician who actually exists within the piece and interacts with the dancers throughout the work.

Pawlet Brookes: How did you come across the idea? What was the motivation behind *Syb Y Osis*? How did you come up with that?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: I came up with it after...two things happened. First, when I was in second year I made, a second year at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, I made a piece called "Free." And in the beginning part of "Free" I had a musician on the stage and he was playing this tune and I was singing and then the dancers were dancing as well. And it just had these elements in it. And within that there was a duet between two characters who were a bit like brother and sister. And I thought, I really want to expand on that little moment.

And also I was reading *Ruins of Empire* by Akala and little snippets inside the book he touches on his own life and kind of made me envision himself and his sister navigating being of mixed heritage in Britain in their time. And still in our times it's quite a very difficult thing. I think he was playing football in West Ham. He was always on quite a positive road. But at the same time because of the things around him, whether it was the fact that police would stop him at least

once a week or more just because of who he is and where it comes from or because he's in the barber's and he witnesses a guy just getting stabbed, and all these things in his life exists, but still he finds himself navigating himself, him and his sister, Ms. Dynamite, into being what they become.

Now he's a well known scholar, one of the best mathematicians in the country. Yeah. So that narrative really influenced me. And you'll see the two characters in the piece, they go through so much stuff. They go through moments where they're fighting each other or they're fighting themselves. Or they're fighting outside energies that are coming into their harmony that they're having with each other.

Pawlet Brookes: And do you feel that these are some of the issues that you tackle as a young black man?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Yeah absolutely. What was I watching yesterday? I was listening to basically code switching. I feel like in order to survive I have to code switch sometime. Sometimes I'm with other Afro-Caribbean people and I can go straight into Patois and just keep it deh suh and it nice and easy. And it feel like it just a bounce and everything. And then I go into a professional space where I'm the minority, and I have to bring out the well-spoken English. And that in itself to me is artillery. That is a weapon that I've had to sharpen so that I can navigate in spaces because I know people from so many different walks of life. And it's because of the walk of life that I have, being a black man born in Jamaica, moved to England when I was 10. I lived in Barking for a year and a half, which Barking is a very rough environment.

Then moved to Leeds, growing up mainly in Chapeltown and Harehills. And I meet so many different people from different walks of life. I remember a friend in high school saying he's not going to amount to anything because his dad was locked up. His uncle's locked up. This and that. And he's a Black man, he's a brother. You know what I mean? So that reflection of him experiencing that and really tapping into myself and saying I don't feel like that is where I need to end up. So I need to go somewhere else. But still those things are around me. Like the fear of police stopping me, the fear of someone might think I'm the wrong person and I get into some kind of gang foolishness if I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's all these different things.

Pawlet Brookes: So in many ways your work tends to look at diversity, identities in today's British society. So I wanted to ask how are you navigating the question of identity in your work? Because you're talking about it in terms of your everyday life, you're in these different spaces and places, but how do you feel that you're doing that within your work?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

So in *Windows of Displacement*, my solo show, there's a, there's a bit where I say "Who am I? Universal being, human, man, African, Jamaican, British." And I feel like that's what identity really is. It's a layer of things. It's so many layers. And depending on what box society tries to put you in, you may have an extra layer. And that is an extra pressure because people expect you to act a certain way to those identities at times. And I feel like within my work, I'm really trying to say we all need to know ourselves. We all need to know yes I'm all of this, but at the core I know how I'm going to show up as those. And no one else can tell me how I'm supposed to show up as those. So that's my whole outlook on how to dissect and speak about identity in my work.

Pawlet Brookes:

But do you think because essentially you're a Jamaican and a lot of the artists that I know that are Jamaican, especially if I talk about someone like L'Antoinette Stines, she's very clear about who she is. And that really informs her work because she's clear that she's a Jamaican and a proud Jamaican. And that clarity of vision, there is no clouding for her about are you you're this, are you that. That clarity. Do you think because you were born in Jamaica, you inherited that sense of you're clear about who you are as a Black man, and that's empowered you in terms of the work that you're producing.

Akeim Toussaint Buck: I'm going to have to say yes because yeah. I think about that sometimes. I think about how my education started in a majority Black space where I was taught by a Black woman and I was around Black kids. There was one white guy in our class. And we learned about the national heroes and a heroine, Nanny of the Maroons or Nana of the Maroons. And learning about Marcus Garvey, listening to Bob Marley. These things really infuse a positive image of who you are for you. So definitely those first 10 years of my life has really affect the way that I navigate in British society.

I think it's in neuroscience, they say the first seven years of your life is where you get all the programmings of your subconscious. How you're going to see yourself and react through the world. What I learned in Jamaica really really empowered me. Land of many, one people. And you really see that in Jamaica. You see that, you feel that. And I walk with that in my life. So yeah, that definitely comes through my work actually. Yeah.

Pawlet Brookes: Music seems to play a huge role. And you talked about Bob Marley a minute ago. So can you talk to me a little bit about the music that you choose and the music choices and how that sits with your current choreography?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Yeah. So with *Symbiosis*, Paris plays live guitar. Paris is a multi-instrumentalist. And the thing about Paris is she considers herself more of a percussionist. I love Afro-Caribbean or African movement. And I love to intersect it with contemporary movement. I love to play with that. So because of that I wanted something texture wise that kind of encompasses both those worlds. And I feel like guitar or the sitar...I really love those sounds. And yeah. For me, music and playing around with rhythm means a lot for me because it's a different way of communicating a different energy to the audience. It's not just about a space or atmosphere or atmospheric music that doesn't have so much of a set tempo or a set rhythm. I love it when a rhythm...the audiences is reaching this kind of sense of transcendence, which in African traditions music does that. Music and dance does that. And there is no separation of music and dance.

I was talking to an anthropologist who works in the Congo. And he was saying the Congolese tribe that he was working with, they don't have a word that differentiates music and dance. The same word is used for both because they're intrinsic. Dancing is really musicking because one never seems to happen without the other. So that's how music is for me. And furthermore in that I'm starting to get, well as a beatboxer, I'm really into the sounds that the voice makes. The textures that the voice makes. How do we communicate without using words, but sounds and the tones and the textures? So yeah. I'm kind of obsessed about those things.

Pawlet Brookes: So what first got you interested in choreography and how would you describe your choreography? Because you're talking about this marriage of the music and the movement. So how would you describe your style..Akeim's style of choreography?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Hmm. That's a good question

Pawlet Brookes:

For me, you're just talking about what I think is African. You can't divorce art and culture from anything. So we have a holistic approach to the things that we do. So we're not just a good dancer, but we're dancer, musician, an artist, a cricketer, a this and that, the other. Because I think about my background and my dad was a cricketer, but he also did music. He also taught me to tap dance, but he wouldn't say that he was an artist, but he has all these attributes. And you're talking about all these attributes blended as one. So I'm just wondering because in the West we separate. So I'm just wondering how are you describing Akeim? What's Akeim?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: I say I'm an artistic connoisseur or something. I really love to explore different things. I also really love to look at what has been before, and pull inspiration from that

because again, to bring in a Marcus Garvey quote he says, "You can't know where you're going unless you know where you're coming from."

And I feel like that's so true. If you don't know the sciences before how can you now innovate the new sciences? You'll end up making something. And then two days later oh no, someone made that already. I didn't innovate. So I'm trying to break boundaries of how we can marry the two and it's definitely done before, but I don't feel like when I look around in the scope of British choreography or Black British choreography I don't get to see it enough.

And that's probably a different conversation in terms of access and the way that things are set up. Or maybe it's not contemporary choreography but in hip-hop yeah, definitely that happens. And in hip hop theater. So I describe myself and the work that I'd like to make as a contemporary musical theater.

Pawlet Brookes: So what are your aspirations for your company?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: I'm really interested in film and how we can create work for the live space, but also how do we transfer that work into film. And not just a very artistic film, but something cinematic is actually an event that really catches people and gives them a sense of wow, now I want to see the live version. So it just becomes this cyclical kind of thing that people are fed by. For my work, for my company, I really don't just want to entertain people. I really want to enlighten them. I want to really activate people to feel something. To feel inspired. To go out and do something about their lives or do something to make other people's lives better.

Pawlet Brookes: So how are you using this time, the time of lockdown? So we're locked down now and there's an opportunity to use technology, and you're a choreographer, you're a music maker, and you want to explore film or the camera and event. What sort of creative activity are you doing now? How are you using this time?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Well, I've been pretty much incubating. I run a collaboration called Snake Box with another artist who's a musician and a dancer. And we created this short video where it's like a mixture of us making music and dancing. And we've actually released the music as a single on Spotify. And what not. So people could listen to that. I'm currently thinking about how I'm going to use text because I have a collection of poems. I was writing them between the ages of 16 and 26. So over 10 years I wrote a hundred and something poems. And I want to pick out specific ones to create a video with. And I want to also compose the music myself using my voice. So I've been really practicing, honing my skills more with that side of things. I haven't really created anything there yet, but it's coming.

So I've been teaching on Zoom. Teaching my philosophy of movement called earth flow, which draws inspiration from Capoeira, African and Caribbean dance, contemporary dance, and yoga. So I've been teaching that for the past three weeks now. And that's been going really well. And I'm feeling like I'm creating a community or furthering the community around my work.

Pawlet Brookes: So both practically and artistically, what has been the main challenges that you've encountered in developing your career and practice to date?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: The main challenge I think is relationships and keeping up to maintain all the relationships are possible relationships. For instance, so I've toured my solo show to quite a lot of places in the UK now over the past three years. And I've been trying to get the same theaters to be interested in Symbiosis and another piece that I made with the Snake Box friend called *Play*. And it's just seeming really difficult and I'm not really sure why because they enjoyed the first work and it went really well in the majority of the places that I went to. So I'd feel like it'd be a natural thing to say to the artist oh, we really enjoy that work. What's your next work? And when are you looking to program it in theaters? So that's why I'm reaching out to the same places. And some of them are quiet. Some of them not quiet. Some of them it's just a long stretched out conversation. So that's the main thing. And also balancing the stuff that makes you a sustainable amount of money with the stuff that is artistically really rich. And you know you're going to learn something from and it's going to develop you. So those are the two things I really have been struggling with.

Pawlet Brookes: And do you think it's because you're talking about, on the one hand, you're an artist and on the other hand you're expected to be the administrator, the presenter, the person doing all the development work behind the work to get it programmed? Do you think that's the sort of dichotomy that you're dealing with?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

I think. Yeah. I think it's one of them. And I think it's also yeah. Everyone also has lives outside of the profession because I'm also a dad, a son, and a brother, and all of these things. It's funny. We're going back to identity. I really feel that it has been a struggle because of that. Wearing all these different hats. So the past year I got a producer. And that made things much easier because I just appointed her to simply contact theaters and to do some application forms with me. And that really took a lot of the weight off, but then financially I was paying her every month. So then it has its pros and cons.

Pawlet Brookes: So it's a different weight then isn't it? It's a different issue.

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Exactly.

Pawlet Brookes: So what are you currently working on?

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Well, I can't work on anything because of COVID-19! No, not really. I'm planning a wild card that I'll be doing at Sadler's Wells in November if all goes well and we're out of lock down. I'm also just really thinking about upskilling myself in other things to be honest. I really fancy being a teacher because I feel like teachers really get to encounter minds. And again, I feel like I have an innate thing about wanting to help people to open up their minds. So within my work, those themes are always there. So I'm also thinking about training as a teacher because I want to actually teach in high school. To teach English as another thing. On the artistic side there is a duet.

Pawlet Brookes:

So English, not dance?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

No, yeah. Yeah exactly. Dance is amazing to get people within their bodies and also to think because it's helped me with a lot of discipline. And it's helped me to also learn about managing time, which is really powerful. But I feel in a space where we are conversing and discussing specific pieces of literature, certain conversations can happen. If it wasn't English it would be maybe... I also think it's a stepping stone to other things. And then to find myself back at dance because I want to do my masters in dance anthropology.

Pawlet Brookes: I was going to say that you do encounter literature through movement and dance. And so I think there is just as great an opportunity to explore some of the key thinkers of our times through arts. And a lot of the people who have made change have been artists. So I'm just curious that you just think it's just you're moving away from what we know you as in terms of a performer to another area of the arts in terms of English and literature I'm assuming.

Akeim Toussaint Buck: It's a stepping stone to something because I will be then going back to do master's in dance anthropology because that's a massive passion of mine because I just really enjoy learning about how different people develop and see seeking out how dance develops is yeah, another passion of mine.

Pawlet Brookes:

So here we are five years down the road. Akeim, dance anthropologist, where are you? Where are you in five years time?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

That is so hard to decide now. Seriously because of COVID. If you asked me this before COVID-19 I'd be like, bam, bam, bam. I know everything. But honest to God.

Pawlet Brookes: So let's take COVID-19 out of the-

Akeim Toussaint Buck: Oh, take COVID-19 out of the equation.

Pawlet Brookes: So we've taken COVID-19 out of the equation.

And where do you see the sector in five years time? And where do you see yourself within that in five years time?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

I kind of see myself in the center and the fringes of the sector. The reason why I say that is because I feel like sometimes the sector becomes very insular. I feel like there is so much that the work that people do in the sector can do to affect the commercial stratosphere of things that, hence why I am in the process of turning my solo into a film. We started filming before COVID-19 and because COVID-19 happened we've had to postpone two filming dates. And what I foresee doing with that film is to hopefully get it onto market TV and Netflix because I really do feel like there's an audience out there for...not the same commercial formula of art because at the same time commercial formulas of art also holds very traditional formulas of creating art.

For instance, I'm talking about things like the journey of the hero. That kind of archetypal thing that you can find in a storybook, and you can also find it in a Hollywood film. These formulas that art is created by, and has been created by, for eons that I feel like we need to tap into them a lot more as artists in order to really pull in people from different walks of life. Not just the same people in theaters all the time. I feel like the model of making work and putting it in theaters it has been slowly dying especially and probably even more now.

And especially for artists who are independent, they can get a full theater, but you really got to put a lot of work into it and get a lot of people on board.

So in five years time I see myself being able to do that and more in terms of what content I have online, what content I have in literature of my work because I will be also publishing the script of *Windows of Displacement* and publishing this collection of poems. And there will also be films with dance that goes with these poems. I'm always thinking about how can I use what I've

had 10 years ago then and then remix it to then bring it into the now and really touch people again with the same thing but it's new.

Pawlet Brookes:

So it's reinventing it for contemporary times.

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Pawlet Brookes:

Yeah. So finally, how do you maintain confidence and drive in these difficult times?

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

My source of groundedness or rootedness comes from constantly reminding myself where I come from. Not just geographically, but the people who raised me, the simple things. Coming back to something your grandmother told you. Those things that really bring you back. Because yeah, at times... When this whole COVID thing happened I freaked out. I lost so much work that I was just like I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what's happening. All this stuff. And then did that for a week. And then I started to teach my classes online. And I started to remember my practices to come back to breathing. If it's just breathing. Just sitting down, breathing...[takes deep breath] just connecting back to my body, connecting back to the source of power that I have inside myself. Connecting back to the earth, going out in the garden, planting some seeds.

Pawlet Brookes: Connecting back to your ancestral voices, which goes back to the notion of identity. And goes back to the point I said to you about the something that you gained a richness because of your Jamaican heritage.

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

I remember Uncle Jeff telling me we are one. We are one with everything. The moon, the sun. There's a conversation happening. That's why you see one in the other come and those simple things just bring me joy and brings me back home to myself, to my roots.

Pawlet Brookes: Thank you Akeim. That was absolutely wonderful. It's great to get a little bit of an insight into your story and your views on your dance and your creative practice. Thank you.

Akeim Toussaint Buck:

Thank you Pawlet. Really appreciate it.

Pawlet Brookes: Well that was a really honest look at the challenges faced by emerging artists today and how their practice is informed by their lived experiences. I think Akeim's work—and the insights he shared during our conversation—really show the importance of being authentic and true to yourself in your creative practice

I hope you take away from this episode an understanding of how vital it is....that new voices are nurtured and supported...especially those from backgrounds that are not always well-represented within the arts.

Akeim will be appearing at Let's Dance International Frontiers 2021 in Autograph. You can find out all the information about that by visiting our website, [serendipity hyphen uk dot com](http://serendipityhyphenuk.com). You can also find out more about Akeim's work on his website tousainttomove.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. I'm your host Pawlet Brookes...thanks for listening.