I Have Always Been in the Arms of Africa: A Intergenerational Conversation with Dance Elder Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker on her Life and Legacy

Full Transcript

Ferne: Okay! So, how's it been?

Zakiya: It's been going really well. It's been well. A good journey and- good journey. And so, you know, understanding where I am in this journey. I have to tap into you so much more, you know, and understanding your story, your journey, the history, the culture, all of the things, you know.

So first I just want to say I'm so thankful and grateful for you being here.

F: I am enjoying it, interviewing. It's not just me. Thank the ancestors.

Z: I do for sure. And I am going to do a quick plug and just say thank you, Takiyah Amin, Julie B. Johnson, Saroya Corbett, and *The Dancer-Citizen* for allowing us to capture this prolific story and then be able to share it with the larger dance community through *The Dancer-Citizen's* publication. So, Mama, I'm ready to jump in if you are, I've got questions. I got all the questions.

F: I'm ready for you. I think. I think I am.

Z: I just want you to tell me a little bit about yourself and your introduction into dance, you know. How did you come into dance? When did you fall in love with it? Is that, you know, simultaneous or a synchronous process or, you know, how did that evolution happen?

F: Well, I have to first thank the fates, the ancestors, the spirits, for bringing me into a family that was a mixed family. My grandfather was Jamaican. My grandmother on my mother's side had a lot of Native American Indian in them. And then, on my father's side, there was a traditional Sherbro people. And my grandmother on that side – who I only met like one time, when I was very, very little – she was the matriarch. She was the- really the head of the village. And- and she was the consort, you know, to everybody. And the mediator. So I know I got some of that from her. So, when they met, that – even that story of how they met has always been, as I've grown older, more of a flash point for me because here's this very high yeller Black woman that in Africa, people thought she was white. She meets this beautiful velvet jet Black man from Sierra Leone at the University of Chicago. And then they left and went to Sierra Leone right after World War II when the German war boats – submarines – were still in the Atlantic. And they were the only Black people on the ship. On a cargo ship. So, very adventurous folk. And so, I was born in Sierra Leone, [where] I spent the first 13 years of my life.

Z: Wow.

F: My father was a minister. Both of them were “missionaries.” My father was a minister in the Evangelical United Brethren, which is now the Methodist- United Methodist Church. So I grew up, you know, in the Christian ethic, but around me every morning I was hearing the Muezzin calling the Muslims to prayer, you know, And I was surrounded by people who were at the– My father was the principal at Fourah Bay College, which was– So, I was a college brat child on one of the oldest campuses in the west coast of Africa. So, he was a philosophy major, spoke many languages. And so, it was [a] very interesting post, this is pre-[]Sierra Leone independence. So, I grew up in an environment where Black people… White people were kind of like there, but I was kind of, you know, embraced by very strong Black people. And I had an aunt who I thought didn't have any legs or feet because she always wore the grand boubou outfits. And she seemed like she was just floating. Every time I saw her, she was just constantly floating around. And so that has stayed with me as an adult, you know, that image. So, then there were memories of, as I'm writing my memoirs now, there's memories of Boxing Day, which now a lot of that has been messed up with drugs and everything else that's happening all over the world. But when I was in Africa as a child, you know, 13 years there, things were much more delineated. You know, the African traditions were clear; the European traditions were clear. Now everything's gotten kind of mushy mushy. But I really remember being on top of my father's shoulders and him taking me off the mountain downtown into Freetown. And when all of the– the masked dancers and the– the musicians came out and each cohort had their own music and sound and cow horns being blown and all, and I'm sitting very young on top of his shoulders, that all– I'm giving you things that– to help you understand why I am who I am, you know. Cause these are the ingredients that went into the stew of who I became as an artist.

And so, those were memories. And the– and the fact that my father was a minister. But I remember him and my uncle, you know, on– on Sunday afternoons after church. They'd be sitting at my house in the living room in our home, up on the mountains. So there was a breeze coming through, you know. But they'd be drinking beer and eating smoked herrings. And joking and clowning and very un-ministerial , you know? So, like, I have those memories of the fact that spirituality and laughter go together. They go together, you know?

And so, that was something else. So, then he had an opportunity to go represent – as he was very much a part of the Sierra Leone planning for– in the government– for independence. And before that he went to Israel to represent Sierra Leone at a conference on the health of children. And there's a book that came out that talks about this African man who got up at the conference and talked passionately about the infertility rate of African babies.

You know, and that was my dad. And in fact, when on his way back, the plane crashed with 63 people on board, and he died. He was only like 47 years old. And I– that whole period of my father dying and in such a shocking way. And– and then learning later his legacy – and I'll tell you in a minute how that tied into the research that I'm doing now – is that he is very much present in my life. As I've identified more and more, what I wanted to be and who I wanted to be, he has always boosted me. I definitely know that now for sure. So anyway, that's kind of– And then my mother sent me to an English boarding school, in Penzance, Cornwall, England, I'll have you know! And I stayed there long enough to have an understanding that I can use–

access– now about what it means to be– really be a minority amidst a bunch of white English people in England. And to really feel– to have to tap into my identity and– and as a young child, so I could survive some of the cultural brutality that I was faced with in that scenario.

Then we came to Milwaukee because she had to get a job and [I] went to Custer High School where I was, again, the anomaly. Okay? Because there, I had this little afro, which was what– I was like one of the first Black women to introduce the afro, what we call the freedom cut, you know? That's, you know, people forget, you know, their history is like this– this natural hair. It couldn't be called natural because nobody wanted to say that, so they associated it– because it happens, most of the women who were in the movement had their hair– Odetta, and you know, Nina Simone, all these people.

Z: Yes, yes, yes.

F: People weren't into the dreads so much at that time. So, I got ridiculed. I was an anomaly. I didn't fit in the high school, didn't go to the prom, was just basically, you know– and I had a very thick British, quasi-British African accent at the time. And I worked really hard to lose that because I was ostracized for it so much, you know? And so that gives you the kind of wide span of that period of my life. And I felt I have always been in the– I'm looking at this one book, *The Life of Colin Turnbull*, who was an anthropologist– actually it's kind of a weird book. But anyway, the title of it is, *In the Arms of Africa*, right? And I'm thinking to myself, I have always been in the arms of Africa, and I think that's been our struggle as Black people, is to return back to the arms of Africa, however inconsistent those arms may be at times. And however confusing those arms may be at times. (And this is not to be confused with being with African men rather than just– I have to be specific, you know?)

So, and that gives you a little bit of the pre-part of what made me, you know. My mother being West Indian, we ate a lot of West Indian, African, African American food. So, I grew up really appreciating and enjoying all of that. And I– so I have all of the smells and the sounds of Africa as a child growing up. I have all of that memory is there.

Z: Asé. Can you talk a little bit about how you came into dance? And sort of like who, like your dance training, your predecessors, you know, that sort of space of who you trained and studied with? 'Cause I know– I know just from the little bit that we've talked about that you stand on the shoulders of some– some giants, you know, and that notion and like us documenting and having that history and story is really important to me.

F: And, you know, to our journey here of dance in the States and Black dance in the States.

Z: Yes.

F: Well, I got– I would say that I got turned on to the concept of dance not being separated from music because of being on the shoulders of my dad. You know, I understood– As a child I didn't understand, but I understand now how important the music is or rhythm is and the

sounds, the shuffling of the feet, the Agogô, you know, the drums, the singing, the chanting, how all of that is the dance that I– that I know that makes me feel comfortable. So, I was turned on to the concept of dance and– and my father used to play– I grew up listening to a lot of different kinds of music and I grew up listening to the scores of Broadway shows. So, in my mind, in Africa, as a little girl, I just knew I was gonna be a dancer. At that point of reference, I was gonna be a Broadway dancer. I knew I was gonna be a singer. I knew I was gonna be in the performing arts 'cause that was just who I was as a child. My nickname, traditional nickname is Yonkoto. And Yonkoto means always messing around. Never understood what that meant until now. I was like, how fitting, right? How fitting. Yonkoto! There's Yonkoto again, look at her.

So, then, I would say that I have– was blessed– that I was blessed to be taught– to be– have the experience of Pearl Primus. That was my first big, big thing for me. I was just in high school, and Pearl Primus, strangely enough, was brought to Milwaukee. At the YMCA, through the Wisconsin Dance Council, I think it was. You imagine how many years ago that was. And I remember. I had just come. I was just beginning to feel– grow up and feel the beauty inside of me, and realize that it was going to be a battle for me to accept how I looked, you know, as a Black woman. And I walk into this room and there's this big, dark Black buxom woman with bracelets all down her arms and a flat nose like mine and big buttocks like mine, and she just, she slayed me. She just totally slayed me. I was like, who is this woman? And then after she left, I remember reading about her, looking her up and, you know– and in those days, we didn't have like, internet, so, you know, let's go to the library and dig, dig, dig and, and found out who this woman, this Pearl Primus was. And– and I said, this is not an accident that I have had this opportunity to– I wish I could have talked to her more. But see, this is the thing people don't realize: If you teach from a place of integrity and honesty, somebody could be in that class that only meets you for that one time. But that one time, if it's, if it's spiritual and purification is there, you may have totally turned that person around. And they may never meet you again. And Pearl Primus did that for me. She is definitely the person that spiked me into going into this as a profession. because I was able to see in her that it was possible. So then, down the road, I had a chance – my ex-husband and my daughter and I wanted to – we went down to East St. Louis and made an appointment and went in to visit Katherine Dunham in her home. And I remember she was not that well at that time, you know, she was having trouble walking and her hips and everything, but she came down and she didn't hardly speak. She just came down and sat in the living room and said, "How are you?" And told me to tell her my story and blah, blah, blah. Not much of a conversation. She basically kind of stared into space a lot. Okay? But then, through the years I had been studying her and reading all the books about her and– and also had an opportunity to go down there when– in one of her dance conferences. And that's where I met MorThiam, you know, who was– who she had brought from Africa. And he and I developed a long-term friendship. But it was after I had the opportunity to spend a night– a whole night she stayed at my house– was with Lavinia Williams.

And when I– when I realized– I found out that– see, Katherine was on such a high spiritual level of her path as a Mambo in the Haitian religion. She was not as approachable because she, you know, it's like sitting with a monk. You know what I'm saying? It was like going to visit the Dalai Lama. You know you don't expect a "heehee haha" kind of conversation because they're on a

whole other spiritual plane, right? But Lavinia was accessible. And Lavinia didn't go. She chose not to become a Mambo. The vineyard went into initiation, but she didn't go that far. Because she wanted to have accessibility to her students. At a different kind of a level. Okay? And Lavinia, we brought her in. I have a tape of her and pictures of her. When she did, she joined in with us and did the Yanvalou. You know? I only had one night with her. We sat up all night at my kitchen table and watched the sun come up. And we talked about– not so much the dance. She talked with me about being a woman and matriculating into my womanness and art and how the art felt and fed that. And how the womanness fed the art. And she taught me, she told me about the demons that would come after me. You know, the demons that– that are the demons that don't really know that they're demons, which are the– the worst and most dangerous kind. You know, the personalities that come after you. Because they're threatened by your magnificence, by your deliciousness. Right? By your integrity and all of those things. So, yeah. So they would come around and try to– to sabotage you, to lay you down to– you know, under the guise of many different things, and turn you off your path. So that experience, you know, was like totally unbelievable. Lavinia had a soft spoken voice, but was incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful.

Chief Bey was another one of my teachers, you know. With that rough, dark, deep kind of voice, you know, used to cuss like you know what. Strong. You know, supportive. I remember when I created the all-women's drum unit and we played– he came to rehearsal and he, we played it for him and he says, "Y'all on a whole different place." You know, and it was like– and he said, "Don't let nobody tell you that you can't be no drummers, that you can't this." And then he taught us the Baya by the Kikuyu women just to prove– and he said– taught this to us in front of the male– the male drummers in the company to support me. He said, "This here I learned from the sisters, the Kikuyu women," and that I built that into the Mwanemkee 9 drum orchestra, which I still have in my head. You know, that whole thing that we did. So that– that the bayou rhythm was an African woman's drum. And I remember as a child, the Bundu, the women, young girls going into the osandi, going into the University of the Forest. And when they would come out, they'd be covered in white clay – hojo, right? And I remember seeing the– that, you know, the girls coming out when they had finished their training. And let me tell you, there were no men playing drums. It was women playing drums. So, I know that there was some kind of cultural– what is the word I'm looking for? Cultural hidden thing that brothers went through when they first got their hands on the drums. They– they went into this whole macho– machismo thing that "this is the djembe… is a man's drum and women don't drum in Africa" and blah. I went through that whole period. Now– now that has stopped because it's– everybody knows that's not true. But remember there was a period where the brothers were, like, that was their domain. And a lot of people like Chief Bey and all of them were like, "What y'all talking about?" You know? Right. So, you know, that whole experience of women playing drums and– and my creating, you know, the 9 Mwanemkee drums, which we premiered in New York. And we were the first all-women's drum group to– to actually appear in New York City. So, you know, all of that. You know, I think about Chief Bey and I think about Yayodele Nelson from the Women of the Calabash, who taught me how to play Shekeree. Another amazing spirit that people don't talk about a whole lot. She was very, very important in the movement. Rhonda

Morman from International African American Ballet, who– we're still friends today. John Blanford, you know. Wilhelmina Taylor, who is still alive and active in New York.

Actually. I mean, these are people who have such a long history and who, you know, we influenced each other, but they really influenced me 'cause I was just, you know, newly coming up and I don't believe that I had half the talent that Rhonda Morman had. And that– that group that was in the International African American Ballet. They were really exceptional. You couldn't tell the difference when you saw them on stage from them and Les Ballet Africains. That's how much they did their research. But then they went to Africa every year, you know. And their reason for going to Africa was not to grab and take, you know, 'cause now I feel we are in a culture where everybody has to have, because of the internet, there's so much access out there that you can just go onto YouTube and just grab and take, grab, snatch, grab, take, grab, snatch, and then you do that so long that you start to think that what you grabbed was yours.

Z: Right.

F: And so, you end up, like, propagating something that's actually not yours because you haven't done any of the wood shedding to develop your voice. Right? Because you are now in the grab, snatch, take culture. Whereas I'm grateful that when I came up and the people I came up around, we were not grab, catch, snatch people. We actually– if we saw something that we– that we– that fascinated us, we wanted to go learn what it was and who and why. You know? And then if we came back and we, you know– and we reform it, we would reformulate stuff for the American audience. But we always said where it came from. Right. And who inspired us to do it. So, there you have it. So that– that's, you know– and I could go on and on and on about other people, but those are the main people that kind of like really.. and then it was Alvin Ailey. Who I have a letter from. 'Cause I wrote to Alvin Ailey when I was young and was getting ready to go to Ghana to study. And I wrote to– how much he inspired me and blah blah blah.

And I never expected--

Z: Hold on, Mama. Hold on one second. Something's happening with the sound and I don't want to lose this 'cause this is the good stuff here.

F: Okay.

Z: I think we sorted it out. It was something going on with the speaker.

F: Everything okay? Yes, so Alvin Ailey, I did– like I said, I wrote to him as a young dancer and I didn't expect anything back. And I– you know, I'd hoped, but I didn't put too much into that. And then the– the mail came and then there– here's this letter from him, handwritten. And I was like, wow. And he says, you know, stick to what you're doing. I think it was handwritten. It's been a minute. I didn't have to look at that again. But when I looked and [it] said, "Dear Ferne,"

and then I looked and it said, “Alvin Ailey.” Alvin Ailey! You know, so, yeah. Yeah, it's– I've been blessed with that.

Z: Asé, asé. We are so grateful for your blessings. We really are. Cause you have paved the way. And so that's some of the stuff that I kind of want to talk about. Though I know a bit– a small portion of your story. I do want us to talk a little bit about your history and your journey into going into UWM – University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and that journey and process. And then, you know, after we kind of dive into that, I would like to talk about your journey into creating Ko-Thi and your legacy as well. So, yes. It would be interesting to know sort of the timeline of the two. Sort of like which came first, or how did all of that kind of develop?

F: Well, it really developed simultaneously.

Z: Asé. Okay.

F: Because I was– I had just had my daughter in 1971. The company, I created in 1969. I had my daughter in 1971. In the 1971-72 semester, I boldly walked into the Department of African American Studies, is what it was called at the time. It's had new changes now, in terms of what it's called – Africology – and it's had many different changes, but I didn't have anything to do with the Dance Department or anything like that because my experience in the Dance Department as a student at UWM was not a good one. I remember being in a ballet class and the ballet instructor telling me that I needed to tuck in at the bar. And I– it ended up with my saying to him in front of the whole students, “I'm already tucked. That's my ancestral butt you're talking about.” And he didn't know what to do with that answer. I had an afro way out to here, Angela Davis style at that time, and he didn't know what to do with me. And when I said that, I said, “My butt is already tucked,” you know? And so, I basically– I was so incensed. That had such a powerful effect on me that I literally stormed out of his class. So then, I– you know, that was interesting. And at the time, he was teaching an African dance class as a white instructor and the class was called Primitive Dance. That should tell you everything, right? So I didn't go to the Dance Department. I went to the Department of African American Studies, and I said, “I looked at what you all are teaching here, but you have a major gap and a hole in this process as you teach African and African American history, ‘cause you don't have the dance in here. And that is how we as a people communicate ourselves. That's how we celebrate ourselves. So, you got all this other stuff going, but there's no movement.” So, they said, “Okay, you want to teach a class?” I said, “Sure.” They– they gave me a three-hour slot at night with no drummer. And I taught that for, like, two years, or whatever, in the basement of Mitchell Hall. And the class got really big and I guess– and it's just me, and a tambourine, and a stick. And part of what I taught was some lecture, some informational stuff, then we'd get up and dance and then we'd– you know, pretty much my format that I use today. Then we'd sit and do assessment and communication. And the Dean, the Fine Arts Dean, happened to be walking through Mitchell Hall in the basement and peeked in and saw this– this class. So, being at that time, well it still is, numbers are important in terms of your budget. You know, how many students do you have enrolled, blah, blah, blah. So, from a selfish standpoint, he goes into a Dean's meeting and says, “How, where, who– who is this woman teaching in the basement of

Mitchell Hall? Cause she's got a huge class. It's a dance class. And so, the Dean of Letters and Science and the Dean of Peck School of the Arts had a tête-à-tête and the Dean of the Peck School of Arts said, “I want her. She should be in the Dance Department.” So that's how I got into the Dance Department.

And for seven years I taught this beginning African dance class, no tenure track, no nothing. Seven. You hear me? Seven years they got from me and then they decided to put me on tenure track. Well, not tenure track. They actually just put me on as full-time faculty, you know, cause I was ad hoc or what have you at the time. So, then it started to count. So, my first seven years at UWM weren't even counted. Okie doke. So fast forward, I don't have a master's degree, I don't have a PhD in the high ivory tower experience. However, I know that the ancestors have given me a master's degree and the ancestors have given me a PhD. How do I know this– is because– actually, is because I was put in a situation with– in an institution where that was the only way you were considered valid. However, I made sure that I could teach just about everything. Even if they handed me a ballet class to teach, I could have taught that. I made sure I could teach composition. I diversified my palette. I read everything. Right? And then I started digging into my own cultural aesthetic and made sure that I could– and started developing courses. Now. Soon they realized, “Oh crap. You know, Ferne, this semester so and so's, can you teach this?” Sure. And that's how I wiggle my way into teaching Comp One and Two. You know, to, teaching– you know, a lot of the courses. And then that's when I developed my own course and said, “Okay, here I got a history class. Cause I don't understand what y'all are doing in your dance history class, ‘cause it doesn't talk about Black people at all.” And I'm tired of coming in just when they're going to do the Black thing, you know, and talk about Black dancing– this, in one semester– one course period time. Like, that's all we got. I said, “I got a whole semester's worth of stuff.” And so, they said yes. And that's how this whole thing blossomed.

Then I said, “Why am I doing all of this work and we don't have a major or sub major or what have you?” And that's how the African track kind of grew. And I had a lot of resistance in that faculty. Yeah, none of those people are around now. Whole other crew of people. I think Simonee might have been there at the end of it when we were putting stuff together, but none of those people are there now. And putting the African dance track together– Have you seen it? I think– Did I send that to you?

Z: No, I haven't seen it. I haven't.

F: Okay. Okay. I will make sure that I get you the curriculum. It's not complicated or anything and they’re still using it ‘cause it's African dance, second level. African technique class is inside of the African track module. Right. So, it's still there. So that's, you know, I mean– I had comments made to me, like– ‘cause I had to write the rationale for why it was done and I'll send you all of that okay?

It was interesting and I realize these people are threatened and this is way before this whole woke thing that's going on now and the discussions that are being held now about Black

curriculums and all of this. This is before that. But I knew it's always been there. It's always been there and we cannot be naive. In our knowingness of the truth of who we are and what our aesthetic is and what our people bring to the front. You know, in terms of the work and art form, we cannot allow it– ourselves to be sabotaged. Okay. Because you know what? We can't lay sleeping because it is a battle. It has always been a battle and it will always be a battle. Because for the world and some people in the world to accept that we have an aesthetic, even though they use it all the time– I can't tell you how many movies I've seen where when– when the white folks are getting together and singing and dancing with one another and loving on one another, guess what? They use Black music.

Z: Right, Yeah.

F: And what would modern dance in America be without the Black aesthetic? Hello?

Z: Yes, Mama. Yes, yes, yes.

F: So that's how that whole track happened. And then I inserted– it turned out– because we do, for some reason it comes [as] part of our heritage, tend to, without knowing it, be the grandmothers wherever we end up, no matter how old you are. The students started coming to me, so I left my door open in my office and then the faculty started coming to me when they were having problems and I said, "Well, if I'm going to be doing all of this" – in the faculty meeting, I said, "We need a department mediator. I'm going to be it. And I want the title. I want the title." So, for a while there I was the like the Department Mediator, and actually kept the department from getting into a lot of trouble and a lot of students getting into a lot of trouble because, you know, breaking it down, it's like, yeah, you're mad at such and such teacher, but did you turn in all of your homework assignments? Uh, no. Right? And then I would have to confront faculty members and I mediated between faculty members. And then I moved up to being a mediator for the Peck School of the Arts – the dance component in the Peck School of the Arts. So, I got to see a couple of cases, and then I got moved up to the chancellor's office to work on mediation with some of the faculty issues that were going on that was much more heinous. Okay. So, I learned a lot through that experience. And then I just– at the same time that that was going on, Kofi was flying. He's this-- Go ahead.

Z: Yeah, I'm just like, how did Ko-Thi come to be? Like, I want to start at the origin, Mama.

F: Like, how did that happen?

Z: Yeah.

F: 1969, I had just come back from studying with the National Dance Company in Ghana. And I remember sitting on– I had gone to Elmina Castle and I remember the tour that we went through. And the brother who was giving the tour, whenever he was referring to the people who were in the castle and then moved onto the ships and whatever he would say, he never said "we" or "we were." And so, there was– it was obvious that somebody else wrote his script,

but he didn't identify with the script. Right? And I ended up going outside, sitting on the beach outside of Elmina Castle and just watching the waves coming in. And I literally prayed to the ancestors and it was like, I feel drawn to being a connector. But I don't know what this means. I know I love to dance and I want to help me understand what I'm supposed to do. And it came very clear: go back home to the United States and use your dance as a means to connect the continent, because I felt that there was ignorance on both sides about the true story and identification. And that's how Ko-Thi started. I came back and I started working with a group of young people in the basement of a church. I'll tell you, the interesting thing about Ko-Thi is that, for the first 20 years– 10, 15, 20 years– we never needed to have a booking person because the calls just came in. It was like the door opened and, you know, it went from being in a little club to – I remember when I said to myself (and I found this in one of my diaries), this is too much work, you know– this is too much work for it to be a club. And then I remembered all my experiences and– and Rod Rogers, Lord have mercy.

How could I have left his name out? Rod Rogers was a major impact person. It impacted me in understanding that an African American dance company can be a business and can be run like a business. He taught me that. And so, I put all that together and I was like, oh, okay! So yes, let's turn this thing into a real business. So, our– we're not a folk dance company anymore. We're not a club. This is going to be a business. We're going to get a board. I'm going to get a board of directors, and learned what that was all about. And we're going to get a 501(c)3. Learned what that was all about and how that opened up access to grants, etc. And what a 990 is, you know? And why that's important. And quarterly tax reports and, you know, workmen's comp, you know, what is all of that? And the discipline that you have to rise to the occasion of not just coming into the dance studio. Just because I'm a brilliant dancer and just because I'm the best choreographer on the planet, but if I don't have a business sense, it isn't going to mean anything. So, who's your target? Who do you want to reach? Why do you want to reach them? What is it they need that you can offer? You know, that whole dialogue then becomes the marketing strategy and the development strategy and the da da da. And then the most important thing is how did Ko-Thi come about and be 50 plus years now, and have at one point a $800,000 budget?

Z: Wow.

F: And now the budget is $272,000. Because shit happens, you know, and you've got to be able to ride it, you know? The typhoon comes in and you got to swim like all you got. Hold on the palm branch, wait for the flood water to go out, and then get back on and start it again. And that's where we are. And we've had a series of those, right? But we've been there to the top of the– to one of the top– close to the top of the mountain. We know what it is in the 90's to be an international and national touring entity. I know what it is to have a stall of dancers; 14 of them getting a check eight and a half months out of the year. You know, I know what that is and I know how hard that was to sustain. To a point. We couldn't sustain it through the economic crash that happened right in the early 2000s. And it's been– just trying to hold– just keep our heads and chin up above the water ever since all of that. Some sabotage that we had to survive and, you know, I don't want get into all of that, but I can tell you if you're successful,

they coming for you. So, keep your books clean, your head clean, you know, they comin' for you. And flash back to my– my all nighter with Lavinia Williams. She told me all about that. Right? Okay. So, I was ready for it.

Z: Asé, asé.

F: And that's how the company, you know, came about. And the other thing is, as a choreographer, you know, I looked around and I saw what everybody was doing, but I was also fascinated with– I guess from being on that beach at Elmina and sitting there and seeing the Atlantic Ocean and realizing what we went through, you know, to go from this point to across the sea, that there was something special in the middle if you– if you went up in the sky and could look down and you could see what we now call a diaspora. The middle passage. And the diaspora. And so, I became fascinated with what would happen if an element from here was researched and here was researched and here was researched and it got put together. And I was working at the time with a great musician and a thinker. My musical director was Dumah Saafir, and he was in the same spot of thinking that I was, you know, that everybody was doing the traditional dances from different places. We didn't need to get into that because we had people already – like International African American Ballet, who were really doing a great job. So, we ended up with a piece called Juba, which is what we presented in New York City, you know, and we put them in white tuxedos. With chokatoe pants and vests and top hats and white gloves, right? Drummers had on tuxedos with white tennis shoes, and kufi caps, right? And we took the Juba rhythm from Haiti, and we put it with Djouba from the Francophone countries. Juba. And then we linked William Henry Lane, Pattin' Juba. And it was all related. And that became this Juba piece that we did at BAM. And that's what fascinated me about your work, Zakiya, because when I saw the work that you submitted in your packet, I saw you doing that. I saw you, kind of, being free enough to take from here and take and really be– look, Picasso did it. He was influenced by African art and became known as the Father of Cubism in – which is a lie, but, you know, I'm saying that he literally stole the African cubist way of looking at the human form and formed and turned it into his work. So why can't we do it?

Z: Yes, ma'am. Understood. As I'm listening to you, I'm like, yep, yep. This is why you said it was destiny, and that's why us meeting and connecting was not by chance because as I'm listening to you talk about that, and especially during that time, right– during that timeframe where – we've had conversations about it – it's just that, you know, as African Americans, it was this sense or this movement to go ahead and preserve culture and re-establish the connections and links between, you know, us and the folks in a diaspora. Whether we're looking at it through a particular lens of either traditional West African or Afro Cuban or Afro Brazilian studies. And for me, as a being, I'm like, well, I'm influenced by all of it, right? I am a child of a diaspora. And so where do we find the agency to be able to create and pull from all of those resources? And so that has been sort of like, for the lack of a better word, the impetus of my work. And so then to hear and see and witness you doing this, you know, several decades before me is like, yep, this was supposed to be. This is exactly where I was meant to be. This is how it was supposed to happen. 'Cause you know, I needed this connection and, you know, to understand

more, you know, about where I am, especially here in the city. The culture here, what foundation has been laid, right? The sweat equity.

F: Yeah, and, but, you know, I'm not naïve enough to think that because, you know, sometimes somebody says, "Well, why did you stay in Milwaukee?" Because I never thought of going anywhere else because there was always a need for me to be here in Milwaukee. Because sometimes you stay, and you do your work on one level. I've had a certain kind of freedom because I was not in that kind of East Coast New York competitiveness that was going on, which I didn't feel would help me. You know, I didn't want to be in a battle with other dancers.

Z: Right.

F: Okay? I didn't. So that never crossed my mind that that's a place I would want to be. The second thing is that sometimes the work that you have to do – most times the work that we have to do in terms of propagating our culture – is being delivered in a community or to people who literally don't know and don't, as a result– sometimes don't even appreciate it. But you don't stop because that's the reason you're there.

Z: Yes. That's the truth.

F: And it's not for everybody, but that's why I stayed here, because a Ko-Thi Dance Company without– I mean, when I tell you the thousands of people and families that Ko-Thi has influenced! You can go to the grocery store and have on a Ko-Thi t-shirt, and somebody's going to stop you and say "Ko-Thi, you know, my mama used to bring me" – that, "my mama used to go." Or somebody's going to walk up to you at the gas station 'cause you got on a Ko-Thi Dance Company shirt and they'll say, "Hey, is Ferne still around?" You know what I'm saying? It's like I took classes in, like, 1972. You know, at such and such a school and they still remember that. So, you are where you are. How does this thing go? Wait a minute. Hold it. Bloom where you are planted. So, until you get unplanted and put in a pot someplace else, just bloom there, you know, be the weed that comes up through the concrete.

Z: Yes, ma'am.

F: And for me, let me say this now so you'll have it on record. I don't want to be a footnote when I am an endnote. See, and what I recognized in you is that you ain't no footnote.

Z: Thank you, Mama.

F: You are an endnote. And at this stage, at 75, I am interested in having around me endnotes 'cause that's how the legacy moves on.

Z: Yes ma'am.

F: Right?

Z: Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am. Listen, I got so much here. I'm sitting here, like, I've got to process everything you've just given me and there's so much more that we're going to dig into. I really feel like this is going to become a series. It's going to become a series of talks with you, Mama. Like I– we are only starting to scratch the surface here.

F: Oh, I know. And I'm just– I'm just figuring out myself. That's why it's going to be a funny journey because I literally am. Things are happening every day. There's this– there's this African proverb. It says, "When an elder dies, a library burns to the ground." Keep that in the front of your mind because one day you're going be the next elder. When I'm gone. [Kariamu Welsh] is already gone. I'm 75. Most of my peers are gone. Chief Bey, Chuck Davis, Alvin Ailey. They're gone. So, when I'm gone, you are the next, you and the DeMars and all of you guys, you're the next libraries.

Z: Yes ma'am. But we've still got to collect a lot of your stories. We got some more book writing to do before you go. So, we are going to have to schedule plenty more of these interviews and we're going to create a whole series.

F: You've inspired me to get back to it because I have to admit that, well, it has a lot to do with being gone over the summer, getting Covid. You know, I'm just really now– you know, Covid kind of wiped out my energy, you know. And we're in the process of reorganizing Ko-Thi a little bit. Not a little bit, a lot. because to move past Covid into whatever the funding is going to look like, you know. And these are rough times. Just don't put both feet in the water at the same time. There's an African proverb that says, "Do not test the river's depth with both feet." I love these African proverbs because they get straight to the point. Just, you know, don't test it with both feet.

Z: Yes ma'am.

F: And regarding you at the university – I kind of hate this saying that says, you know, "God won't give you nothing that you can't handle." Because sometimes it's like, I need to smack God. 'Cause it's like, don't you see that I can't handle all of this?

Z: Like, can we– can we make it? No.

F: Just for a minute, God, can you, like, just give me a breath?

Z: Yeah. And– little grace. A little grace.

F: Just a little bit of grace. But I do feel that whatever is being given you on your plate now, you can handle it, Zakiya.

Z: Thank you, Mama. Thank you.

F: And what you cannot handle, ask for help. If you don't ask for help, that's when you get into trouble.

Z: Yes, ma'am.