

Artist Spotlight: A Tribute to the Work of Sylvia Magogo Glasser: Dancer, Dance Educator, Choreographer, Social Activist, and Visionary

Sylvia Magogo Glasser的工作致敬：舞蹈家、舞蹈教育家、编舞家、社会活动家和梦想家

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Abstract

It is a great honor to offer this article as a tribute to the enduring impact of Sylvia Glasser's breakthrough accomplishments in promoting dance education and performance in the South African context. This article is based upon interviews with Sylvia, who currently lives in Sydney, Australia, as well as some of her colleagues and former students. In addition, it draws upon writings, websites, and articles that describe her work. I am struck by the humility of this extraordinary and numinous person who has influenced several generations of performers, students, educators, and dancers. She has challenged and broken down stereotypes and barriers during the apartheid years in South Africa and has irrevocably changed the landscape of South African dance with her introduction of the methodology of Afro-Fusion into the dance world beginning in the late 1970s. As the founder of the Moving into Dance Mophatong (MID) Training Program and Dance Company, Sylvia was the CEO, the fundraiser, the choreographer, and the driving force behind this momentous accomplishment. Along the way, she gathered and trained a group of accomplished dancers, educators, administrators, and choreographers. The work of MID continues and remains a living and iconic force in contemporary dance in South Africa today.

Keywords: Dance in South Africa, Afro-fusion Dance

摘要

我非常荣幸地提供这篇文章，向Sylvia Glasser在促进南非的舞蹈教育和表演方面所取得的突破性成就的持久影响致敬。本文基于对Sylvia Glasser的采访，她目前和她的一些同事和以前的学生住在澳大利亚的悉尼。此外，本文还参考了描述她工作的著作、网站和文章。我被这位非凡的、灵性的人的谦逊所打动，她影响了几代表演者、学生、教育家和舞蹈家。在南非种族隔离时期，她挑战并打破了陈规定型观念和障碍，并从1970年代末开始将非洲融合的方法引入舞蹈界，不可逆转地改变了南非舞蹈的面貌。作为Moving into Dance Mophatong (MID) 培训项目和舞蹈公司的创始人，Sylvia Glasser 是首席执行官、筹款人、编舞者，也是这一重大成就背后的驱动力。在这一过程中，她聚集并培训了一批有成就的舞蹈家、教育家、行政人员和编导。MID的工作仍在继续，今天仍然是南非当代舞蹈的一股活生生的标志性力量。

关键词: 南非舞蹈, 非洲舞



FIGURE 1 | From Sassen (2015).

Vivien M. Speiser (VMS): Can you tell me a little about how this work evolved for you?

Sylvia Magogo Glasser (SMG): I am quite ordinary, and consider myself to be very privileged. I have knowledge that I acquired from that privilege and have always wanted to share that knowledge with others. I grew up poor in a town called Pietersburg in what was then called the northern Transvaal during the beginning of the apartheid regime. My father was a Jewish refugee from Lithuania, he had 5 siblings, and his father died in the flu epidemic in 1918, while he was in the USA. I learned tap dancing from the age of 4 and started learning ballet at 8. I was pigeon toed and good at tap. My father always wanted me to be a bookkeeper, which turned out to be useful later in life in running the finances at the Moving into Dance company and school. At school, I was intellectually bright and argumentative, and people said I would be a good lawyer. I was always interested in helping others and thought of becoming a social worker; however, ill health and tropical diseases prevented this from happening, since it was thought that health issues would prevent me from being able to do this. I got ill before taking the elementary Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) exam. Instead of this, I went to London and studied at the London College of Dance and Drama there with the idea of doing the elementary RAD exam and then going on to university

VMS: What did you learn in London at that time and what influence did this learning have on your career trajectory after you returned to South Africa?

SMG: There I learned not only ballet but also about modern dance and national dance. I stayed in a hostel where I met many other dancers who would become lifelong friends

from many of the commonwealth countries. I met my future husband in London, who was doing his doctorate at that time. As well as studying dance, I learned about the history of dance, methods of teaching dance and a form of movement called “natural” movement. I received my diploma and returned to South Africa and began teaching about what I had learned. At that point I didn’t rebel against the constraints and limitations of ballet yet. Studying at the University of the Witwatersrand for my BA degree, I wrote my thesis in 1963 on Bantu education. I had already been politicized from my time living in the Victoria League Commonwealth Hostel together with some other dance students from the West Indies, Ghana, and other countries and where I started being “unaware of race,” and when I returned to South Africa, it became natural in my dance teaching to bring in African dancers. I married in 1964, and in 1968, I began my travels with my husband, who, as an academic, had a sabbatical at that time in New York City. There I took every dance opportunity that came my way including Graham and Cunningham classes. I also took Creative Movement classes and was influenced by Eric Hawkins and the Dance Theatre of Harlem performances. This pattern of living and studying abroad during the sabbatical periods was a great influence on my later work as I began incorporating these new ideas and techniques into my dance teaching and later into choreography, performance, and training for my company members.

VMS: What happened next?

SMG: In 1970, I returned to South Africa and choreographed a piece called Hiroshima with the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA). I discovered the “loophole” of being registered as a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, and for 10 years, I was able to access dance and performance spaces there. During this time, I began working with local dancers and choreographers, and we performed in a variety of venues.

In 1977, on the next sabbatical to Houston, I learned from much from Jan Simons from the Limon Company about the focus of the use of weight and flow. Hawkins had danced with Graham and had softened the contractions of Graham in ways that were conducive to my way of working. I also at that time graduated with aMA in Fine Arts, from the University of Houston.

After my return to South Africa, I worked with the kinds of students who were “too fat” or “not good enough” and found I could teach technique through the use of creative movement. My time overseas gave me the opportunity to work with experimental dance forms as well as contact improvisation, and I learned to integrate aspects of anatomy and kinesiology into my teaching and training approach. I “broke the ice” in Houston with my use of music because I did not count like a musician. This use of music and breakdown of forms continued in the 1980s, and I learned more about polyrhythmic structures and began using these along with the main rhythms. This way, I began working with under-rhythms, and the dancers struggled to hear the music I was hearing.

In 1978, I began my work with Moving into Dance and the use of primal pulse dance forms. At first we used my garage in my house as a “studio space.” After that, my work became more explicitly political, and the company became more integrated

with mixed race dancers. The “studio” was my garage, and we performed in schools in Victory Parkin Johannesburg and in the University of the Witwatersrand Great Hall stage, among other venues. In 1987, the company moved out of the garage and into Braamfontein. I describe this in my book *Tranceformations and Transformations* (Glasser, 2019, p. 5):

With the formation of Moving into Dance in 1978, there was the fusion or synthesis of African music, movement and ritual with Western forms of contemporary dance....Linked to this process of preparation was the integration of black and white people dancing together at the dance company during apartheid....I had not perceived fusion or integration in its various forms as something fixed, but as part of an ongoing creative process that was constantly changing or developing.



FIGURE 2 | “28 September 2019: Sylvia Glasser taking notes in a Moving into Dance dress rehearsal of the iconic work *Tranceformations* performed last week at the Market Theatre.”

From Sassen (2019). Photographer: Madelene Cronjé.

VMS: Can you talk a little about your seminal work *Transformations* in 1991?

SMG: This work drew upon my studies in anthropology and utilized San trance practices and rock art formations. The dance company and I spent time living with the San people and utilized this knowledge as well as the images in the rock art in creating the piece.

This work is described in my book as follows: “This story is about change—ancient and modern change, physical, mental and spiritual change, personal and collective change, political, social and cultural change. It is about destruction, decimation and denial, but also about recognition, respect and revival” (Glasser, 2019, p. 3).

VMS: This work can be viewed at: <https://www.numeridance.tv/en/dance-videotheque/tranceformations>. A later version of this piece is found at https://drive.google.com/file/d/12sMSsRI2_nW7GEBIJXmWJ-FeZ8bsUie/view?usp=sharing. This piece is considered to be a cultural breakthrough and was described at the time by dance journalist Adrienne Sichel (*Star Tonight*, October 11, 1991) as follows.

Breakthrough for SA dance as art:—It is all too rare that a South African work (with the emphasis on African) boldly breaks ground choreographically, aesthetically and culturally. Glasser triumphs where others have partly scored or failed because of her anthropological background.

In Sylvia’s words:

This work was the culmination of all I believed in and the training principles I had evolved over the years and is still widely regarded as a significant moment in the history of dance within the South African context. My work in *Moving into Dance* has spawned several generations of dancers/choreographers/performers/dance educators and community activists. What is clear is that this ground breaking performance work created innovative pathways for dancers towards integrating cultural and spiritual practices that included and invoked multiple histories, and ways of understanding and performing dance.

These include nationally and internationally renowned artists, including Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe, who has written in the cover of Glasser (2019):

From the beginning of *Performing Tranceformations* everything changed for me. It changed my attitude towards other cultures and it also affected the way I do my work.

In a similar way, another legendary performer and choreographer, Gregory Maquoma, commented on the book cover that “*Tranceformations* continued my journey of artistic discovery and always served me as a cautionary reminder to remain authentic in my research and output.”

In an interview with Vincent Mantsoe in January 2023, he commented on the importance of his training with Sylvia and how it has impacted upon his life, his growth and development, and his career trajectory.

VMS: Can you describe the influence that Sylvia has had on your work?

Vincent Mantsoe: In the 80s and 90s, I enjoyed dancing with my friend Gregory Maquoma in the township community group—there was no choreography, we just put

on the music and danced. This dancing was not about artistry but about keeping busy. I auditioned at Moving into Dance in the 90s in the Braamfontein YMCA. In a way, that was breaking the rules of white South Africa to even be in the city. I was accepted into the training program, started without her, and only met Sylvia when she came back to South Africa after one of her times abroad. I remember that the white dancers came to dance in dance clothes and us black kids came dressed in our Sunday best. After the first year of training, I was asked to stay on for a second year as part of a program where there was a big corporation that was supporting us “under-privileged” kids.

In the early years, I lived in the house with Sylvia. First I had to learn to read in order to be educated. At this time, the country itself was beginning to shift toward democracy. The worldwide embargo against apartheid in South Africa had worked and the country was beginning to change. This created a bridge that made it easier to come into town to study. I come from a family of traditional healers (*sangomas*) and was always curious about everything about nature and what it offers by way of transformation and healing.

Together with Sylvia, we began to change the mandate of what can be done in the studio. Sylvia and Moving into Dance was involved in this change in the system and the learning experience with her and was a huge wakeup call for me. While working together as a group on transformations, we went together as a group to Botswana to observe and learn about the San processes. In our work of fusing modern and traditional dance, we found that there was no confusion—just an intermingling of these forms. I believe that movement can damage or repair, and I have learned how to channel that without doubt. I engage with it with sensibility and believe that once the threshold is breached, it is a matter of entering the space and being true to who you are. In performance, this happens within the context of the work. There is a transformation of the body in performance. From Sylvia and my family, I have learned to be humble and accept what is happening. I see this as the task both for the performer and the spectator. When I perform I am carrying a sense of light.

VMS: The current CEO of Moving into Dance is Nadia Virasamy, who has worked with the company for 20 years and continues the work started by Sylvia since 2015 when Sylvia left the country. Interviewed in February 2023, she describes the continuing impact and influence of Moving into Dance (www.midance.co.za).

Nadia: In talking about the history of MID during the apartheid struggle and with the move of MID to the Braamfontein Recreation Centre, Sylvia was able to bring different races together under the radar and this was enhanced in the move to the Newtown cultural precinct. However, during these moves, the white dancers dropped away, and starting in the 1990s, Sylvia was able to position herself by getting by on the old visions and old way of working by empowering youth from low-income communities who want to dance. I became the director of education in the company from 2005-12. I positioned the 1-year training program as a post-matriculation training program which receives Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) funding to train and gain work experience in the community. This program continues with the educational traditions initiated by

Sylvia included the unique Afro-Fusion methodology she developed, which includes the history of dance, traditional African dancing, hip-hop, anatomy and physiology, fundraising, and body conditioning. The students dance and work from 8am-5pm every day.

In 2016, I introduced the Enable through Dance program, attesting to the transformative power of community engagement and dance. These are inclusive dance programs for the community plus we have one disadvantaged dancer as a company member in MID. In these programs, special-needs students are taught and later have a 3-day show of their work in performance. There is an afterschool program in the East Rand in a rural area which is quite isolated. The children there don't even know the city, only the countryside. We see 860 children a week also and work in 3 townships. Sylvia is not just a colleague and friend and mentor but someone who understands it and has been there.

Conclusion

There is no doubt as to the enormous influence that Sylvia Magoga Glasser has had and continues to have in the professional contemporary dance and dance education and training world of South Africa. While influencing and shaping new creative forms of dance/movement expression, she was also able to break down oppressive barriers from the apartheid era and bring people together to support creative and expressive freedom. It is particularly "moving" to know that her influence on generations of contemporary dancers is honoured and continues to shine light on the present and future directions of dance in Southern Africa.

Artist Biography

Born in Polokwane, South Africa, in 1940, Sylvia "Magogo" Glasser, a cultural activist, dancer, teacher, choreographer, mentor, anthropologist, and writer, founded Moving into Dance Mophatong (MID) in 1978, at the height of the apartheid regime in South Africa, as a non-racial dance company and training organization. She was the artistic director until 2013, when she retired. Her pioneering work in Afro-Fusion and Edu-Dance, at the interface between dance and politics, has had a major impact on the democratization and transformation of dance performance and education in South Africa. Her numerous awards include A Knight in the Order Orange-Nassau of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2014), the Order of Ikhamanga Silver South Africa (2016) (<https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/national-orders/recipient/ms-sylvia-“magogo”-glasser>), and Lifetime Achievement Award Arts and Culture Trust (2004). Glasser holds a 3-year diploma from the London College of Dance and Drama, a BA from Wits University (Anthropology, English, and Classical Life and Thought), and an MA (Fine Arts) from the University of Houston.

In 2019, Glasser's long-awaited book *Tranceformations and Transformations—Southern African Rock Art and Contemporary Dance* was self-published through Jacana's Staging Post in association with the Art(t)hive, with funding from the National Arts Council of South Africa. In 2022, this book was published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in the UK.

About the Author

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