‘You Are the Show’: A Hudson Valley Outpost of the Avant-Garde

PS21 presents work that challenges and invites, like performances by QDance, a Nigerian troupe whose leader says, “I am not your entertainment.”

The Nigerian troupe QDance doing a participatory program called “Middle Ground” at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

By Brian Seibert

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CHATHAM, N.Y. — “There is no outside,” the Nigerian choreographer Qudus Onikeku said on Wednesday. He wasn’t referring to his surroundings: the open-air theater of PS21, set in the middle of 100 acres of orchard, meadow and woodlands in this Hudson Valley town. The inside/outside divide he meant was the one between the members of his company, QDance, and the public that had come to see them. “You are the show,” he said.

On Friday and Saturday, QDance is presenting the U.S. premiere of “Re:INCARNATION” at PS21, kicking off a season that includes other international troupes and big names like the Paul Taylor Dance Company and the Mark Morris Dance Group. The summer programming — which also features contemporary chamber opera, postapocalyptic scarecrows, a parade of human-size moles and a participatory installation made of string — is indicative of how PS21 has become a rural outpost of high-end and often avant-garde performance.

But what QDance was doing on Wednesday was even more representative of what makes PS21 distinct. The event, called “Middle Ground,” was part of its Pathways series designed to engage the local community.
Audience members were invited onstage to join the performers in a circular procession and then an open discussion punctuated by company members’ improvised dance. Waiting for people to speak, Onikeku let them sit in awkward silence. Eventually, as guitar and muted trumpet intensified with ululations and drums, he shared his thoughts about the meaning of “we” and everyone’s complicity in injustice. “I am not your entertainment,” he said in a tone that, like the whole event, was at once challenging and inviting.

Balancing, or combining, those two qualities was the difficult task that Elena Siyanko set herself when she became PS21’s artistic and executive director, in 2019. New music, experimental dance, genre-blurring performance: Much of what excites her is a “very hard sell,” she said. It's work that “might leave you confused or off-kilter,” she added, “not your typical bourgeois experience of summer theater in the Berkshires.” And yet she also wants to attract Chatham locals of all backgrounds.

The institution, founded and largely funded and run by the local philanthropist and conservationist Judy Grunberg, put on shows in a tent from 2006 until 2018, when its state-of-the-art indoor-outdoor theater was completed. The next year, Grunberg hired Siyanko. Two months after Siyanko started work, Grunberg died of cancer.

“What do we do?” Siyanko recalled thinking. PS21 was debt-free, but its maintenance costs had gone way up and there wasn’t much of a donor base. Siyanko, who had experience fund-raising for Bard College and in programming and audience development for the Clark Art Institute, got to work figuring out how to sustain what Grunberg had built. Then the pandemic hit.

“In a funny way, the pandemic helped us,” she said. With its ample grounds and flexible, outdoor theater, PS21 was able to present performances (for smaller audiences) as early as July 2020. Local residents were encouraged to use its trails, which made them feel more welcome and comfortable. “The more dogs we saw, the friendlier the owners became,” Siyanko said.
PS21’s indoor/outdoor theater. “In a funny way, the pandemic helped us,” Elena Siyanko said. With its ample grounds and flexible, outdoor theater, it was able to present performances in summer 2020. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

And restrictions on audience size weren’t such a handicap, since much of what Siyanko wanted to present was, in her words, “very niche.” The pandemic also accelerated a trend: Audiences already attracted to this kind of work — and the artists who make it — were moving to the area. (Chatham is a 20-minute drive from the towns of Hudson and Catskill.) Donors accrued and gave more. The PS21 budget increased by about 50 percent, Siyanko said, with a large surplus in 2021.

This might sound like cultural gentrification, but Siyanko is also committed to low ticket prices and accessibility without pandering. The Pathways events, in particular, are designed as points of entry, leading into PS21’s campus and its more adventurous programming.

Pathways began in 2020 with unconventional dance classes and with the chamber orchestra Alarm Will Sound scattered across the grounds performing John Luther Adams’s “Ten Thousand Birds.” “Kids loved it,” Siyanko said, which was also true of the Montreal acrobats cavorting in the trees of nearby Crellin Park in 2021. Some Pathways events, like that one, happen off-campus, engaging with schools and local arts organizations. Others have brought local students to PS21, in one
instance to rehearse and perform with the experimental flutist Claire Chase, and in another to take part in theater camp with the Wooster Group.

Onikeku fits right in with the Pathways project (down to the theater-camp trust exercises he tucked into “Middle Ground.” In an interview before “Middle Ground,” he explained how, while growing up in Nigeria, he gravitated to contemporary dance as a mode in which “you can have your own ideas,” and how, while dancing in France, he ended up at École Nationale Supérieur des Arts du Cirque, studying contemporary circus that reminded him of the total theater of Yoruba tradition.

From the start of his career, he modeled himself on the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti as a consciousness-raising artist. In a series of solos, Onikeku explored philosophical ideas: the isolation of exile, the difference between history and the past, the body as a storehouse of generational memory. Although he had success in Europe, appearing at the prestigious Avignon Festival when still in his 20s, he grew “appalled by the dictatorship of the art market,” he said, the cycle of producing and touring and producing again.

The choreographer Qudus Onikeku, foreground, with his dancers. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times
“I was interested in being more useful within society,” he said. So he returned to Nigeria and founded QDance in Lagos. He was attracted to the creativity of young people on Instagram and TikTok, some of whom he recruited. With the goal of “rehearsing the future,” they focused more on practice than on product, he said. Art making, community engagement and talent development all bled together.

Inspired by the Yoruba traveling theater of the 1960s, QDance began creating works based on Yoruba philosophy and aesthetics — and presenting them on the touring circuit. “I left the art world not because I disagreed entirely with it,” Onikeku said, “but because I thought we could do more with it.”

“Re:INCARNATION” grew in part out of his observation that young Africans on TikTok were using traditional African aesthetics with no direct knowledge of them. “Reincarnation must be responsible for the way the body remembers,” he said.

The work draws on Yoruba ideas of cyclical time and the interpenetration of the living, the dead and the not-yet-born. He conceived the work in three parts — birth, death and rebirth — and death, he said, gave him the most trouble. That is, until one of his dancers, Love Divine (also known as Picture Kodak), suddenly died of electrocution.
“It was the middle of the pandemic, so we couldn’t even come out to mourn,” he said. When the group started rehearsing again, he decided to leave Divine’s role in the piece, as an absence or invisible presence. “As we tour, we carry her with us,” he said. “We feel her presence every night.”

Audiences in Chatham might feel that presence, or not. “As Covid showed us, the world is one,” Onikeku said. “Whatever I do here has repercussions somewhere else. We are living in the same world, but we see it from different angles. My role as an artist isn’t to entertain you but to share that way of seeing and sensing the world. That’s the whole point of my coming here from Lagos.”

On Wednesday, that sharing extended into a mini-lecture about his research as a maker-in-residence at the University of Florida, a proposal to use artificial intelligence to help solve the problem of protecting the intellectual property of dancers.

“I have to assume that my audience is intelligent,” Onikeku said, and judging by the questions and comments, the audience at PS21 seemed to appreciate that assumption.