# Sustenance Through Rhythm: A Reflection on SOLE Defined's Residency at Dance Place

By Charlie Maybee

Rehearsal opens with a drum circle. Djembe player Themba Mkhatshwa stands in the center of Dance Place's studio theater beating a steady drum roll as dancers Quynn Johnson, Ryan Johnson, Jodeci Milhouse, and Courtney Thrower gravitate around him in rhythmic conversation of hand claps and slaps and foot stomps and shuffles. The dancers pause to acknowledge Themba, each with an outstretched arm capped with a firm first. Soon after, he moves away from the circle, but the dancers remain as if the center still holds. It becomes clear that neither the drummer nor the djembe is the center of this gathering. The immaterial yet driving force of the rhythm itself tethers these various players to their focused, meditative space. The collective rhythm creates a sustainable, communal force, which, when followed, becomes the essence of this percussive society cultivated by the inimitable SOLE Defined.

Co-founded in 2011 by Quynn Johnson, the group's current director of arts and education, and Ryan Johnson (no relation), the artistic/executive director, SOLE Defined has become a staple in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area's percussive dance community. With the mission to "entertain the masses, educate communities, and empower youth," the company works to elevate various Black vernacular dance forms such as tap dance, stepping, sand dance, and gumboot. In 2018, Dance Place selected the company for its inaugural cohort of Artists in Residence (AIR) program, which culminated in the 2019 premiere of SOLE Defined's most recent work, *Zaz*, an evening-length exploration into the events and effects of Hurricane Katrina from the perspective of regulars in a New Orleans speakeasy.

Over the course of a week-long residency at Dance Place in March 2021, SOLE Defined invited me to virtually observe a rehearsal and chat about the company's in-person return to the studio for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the United States a year earlier. It became clear that the artists of SOLE Defined dove deep into their choreographic archive to develop blueprints for a new work during which Ryan recalled, "We were able to capture some of our signature pieces and develop them even more." He continued, "As I was creating for this week, it was like, 'Alright, where do we start? How do we start?'" This daunting question echoed the trepidation for many performing artists who are now returning to rehearsal processes after a year of social distancing requirements closed studios, rehearsal spaces, and theaters. He decided: "Okay, we're starting with the djembe, not because these art forms were created in Africa, but because they were created through the ban of this instrument."

For context, early African-American vernacular dance forms like buck dancing[1] and the ring shout[2] are predecessors to many of the percussive dances performed by SOLE Defined. Considered the first American-created dance forms, they are thought to have originated with The Slave Code of South Carolina, Article 36 (1740), which stated: “It is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping of drums, which may call together or give sign or notification to one another of their nefarious purposes.”

**Rhythmic Translation and Transformation**

The code was enacted as a reaction to the infamous enslaved insurrections in Stono, Virginia in 1739 when drum calls signaled directions and movement to protesting slaves. The code clearly denotes a fear of enslaved people’s access to communication that slave owners didn’t understand. It’s a striking feature that shows how tap and other percussive American dance forms originated as an act of enslaved people disassembling, recoding, and embodying their ancestral, linguistic rhythms when African drums were outlawed and confiscated. “These scholars, artists, thinkers, practitioners, and philanthropists, who were enslaved, stolen, and sold, were so intelligent,” Ryan said, “that they then translated [rhythms] into their bodies, which was the precursor to all the things we celebrate today. As we continue to synthesize and translate global rhythms from instruments to the human body, we wanted to also pay homage to that lineage because we do stand on the shoulders of those people and those sacrifices that they had to endure, but also on the brilliance that they created.” It is brilliance crafted through constant resistance to cultural extermination that invented a new approach to rhythmic language -- a language used to pass down an abridged history of their African roots in the ever-performing text of their flesh.

What’s incredible is that SOLE Defined is consciously aware of and drawing from this history, and even encoding it into the opening moment of rehearsal, which I encountered last month. Despite the confiscation (or choreographed exit, in this case) of Themba and his djembe from the circle, the rhythm remains in the dancing bodies like the whisper of lingering spirits longing for response. SOLE Defined simply answers the call of this rhythmic energy and the passing on of this physical history continues.

“The mere fact that we are presenting these pieces, in the way that we are, sustains the traditions, histories, the legacies of the artists that came before,” Quynn noted. “So, by continuing to practice it,

[1] Buck dancing is a term used as a variation of clogging, which is a percussive dance where audible rhythms created with the feet heavily emphasize the musical downbeat.

[2] The ring shout is a religious ritual first practiced by enslaved African in the West Indies and the United States. It is characterized by a group of worshippers moving in a circle while shuffling and stomping their feet and clapping their hands.

continuing to share the history, continuing to expose people to the art forms is, in fact, sustaining it for future generations to take in." This challenged me to consider history as multiple moving, vibrating entities rather than a singular, monolithic monument or immobile text. The physicality required to activate this embodied history is far more nuanced than any words or photographs could possibly capture.

As the rehearsal proceeded, the time came to take this conversation beyond the circle. Dancers' arms fly through the air as they clap and stomp out intricate polyrhythms. In a double duet as steppers were interwoven with tap dancers, percussive hits serve as the common denominator between these two rhythmic languages. Amid the beautifully cacophonous overlapping beats, it occurs to me how clearly each performer's voice can be heard despite speaking at the same time. In this context, the aural percussive conversation requires heightened mindfulness to what each dancer is saying through their feet. What might be possible in a world where we can speak and listen simultaneously? How can rhythm be utilized as a structure to organize voices and provide equitable space for them to not only be heard, but to experience the way they weave and intersect?

**Integration and Hybridization**

Through its percussive practice, SOLE Defined looks to a future where this kind of inter-genre conversation is possible. One of the beautiful things about the work I have been able to witness from the company is that it doesn't entirely focus on the past; it reflects its roots, but also actively interrogates the future of these genres. "When I think about [SOLE Defined's] identity," Quynn said, "I think about seamless integration of the various art forms with the goal of honoring the origins of each one." The hybridization of these percussive dance forms is where the company is thinking about technical innovation. It's never about a singular genre, but about how multiple genres interact with each other physio-musically. Layers of Africanist narrative transpose history to meet our contemporary moment. For example, Ryan described how utilizing sand and water modified a dance's percussive sounds, while Quynn discussed how these elemental shifts in the dance allowed them to bring forward stories inspired by Oyá, the Yoruba Goddess of weather and storms. In thinking about some of these signature dances, Quynn admitted, "It's nice to see them transform and morph into these new [rhythmic] arrangements."

Because of the company's work in educating audiences about preserving Black roots of these percussive dance forms, questions of sustainability arise. How does sustainability relate to SOLE Defined's identity and the work they created over the course of the residency. In reimagining and reflecting on past works,

Ryan noted that when sustainability comes up, the conversation often turns to money and financial stability, but that it's also, he said, "about creating work that lasts." I considered the way many dance works -- especially dance works made by non-white artists -- reflect an alternative, accurate archive of their history outside of a predominantly white-washed account of concert dance history, especially in the United States. Creating as a method of teaching and maintaining a legacy requires deep introspection that the company is currently doing with this new, still untitled piece. As we conversed, Ryan noted both the physical and emotional energy required during this specific moment in the company's history: "You know, this was our first time we had been in the space together, not just since COVID-19, but since we lost a company member, Christopher Brient. The last time we saw him alive was in that space." This added layer of grief to the trauma of both the pandemic and intense moments of racial reckoning happening across the country, demonstrates how SOLE Defined has used this time to bond and share in the radical, joyous act of sound and movement.

Sometimes, sustainability means coming together as a community and responding to a rhythm as a collective voice. As Ryan said, "It's more than just the two of us [Quynn and I]. It is really a community and a village."

Charlie Maybee (he/him) is a dancer, musician, and writer currently based in Winchester, Virginia, who specializes in tap dance. He holds an MFA in dance from the University of Illinois with a certificate in criticism and interpretive theory, and a BFA in dance and choreography from Virginia Commonwealth University. As an educator, Charlie is on faculty at the Shenandoah Conservatory where he teaches tap dance technique, choreography, history and improvisation. He also plays drums and guitar as an accompanist for ballet and modern dance classes. In 2014, he founded Polymath Performance Project, a collective of dancers, musicians, and actors who make interdisciplinary performances that highlight tap dance as the core medium of expression. His current choreographic research explores hybrid identities and object-oriented ontology from a tap dancer's perspective.