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'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa¹

Gerard M. Samuel

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Press the start button: introduction

How does Dance play a particular role in inter- and transcultural formation? Who are the guardians of *inclusions and exclusions* of artistic and thus cultural expression? For example, the remark "I can't go to the yoga class 'cos it is for Hindus" from a Dance student came to my attention as the new Director of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) School of Dance, in 2010. I was the first Black director in the School of Dance's over 70-year history, and many changes were afoot in this post-apartheid era including revisions to curriculum, new recruitment strategies and performance opportunities. "I am bound to meet up with resistance to a Transformation Agenda as the spectre of Apartheid still lingers", I said to myself. Fifteen years later (2025) I noticed a different comment, this time a student expressed her keen interest to research the influence of Tik Tok on the dance scene in Cape Town. She was not a Tik Tok fan, as far as I knew. I began to wonder, how is Tik Tok operating as a universal phenomenon? How are dances culturally bound? I begin this article by asking how does *belonging* to a cultural group (e.g. Hindus, Afrikaners) facilitate exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards another. Does a desire for nation building so urgent in South Africa heighten differences of the multicultural groups found therein? In other words, what are some of the tacit power relations in dance in South Africa, and who gets to 'press play'?

In this article, I explore the context of the specific environment of Cape Town, South Africa in 2020s to discuss how polarities, vestiges and the effects of

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'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa

colonialism and apartheid linger in this vibrant, touristic and economic African environment. I will simultaneously suggest that this space acts as a composting site, filled with new dance companies, exploring and developing patois and dialects of African contemporary dance to articulate their presence. I include the muffled voices of post-apartheid dancers and choreographers to illuminate a politics of identity and notion of privilege that surrounds the issues of nonracialism. This I contend is what brown and black dancers continue to face. I specifically introduce into this discussion the Darkroom Contemporary, a small, independent dance company and examine one of their recent works, *autoplay* (2025) performed at the Baxter Theatre. I draw from a recent interview conducted with Darkroom's founder Louise Coetzer. Coetzer and I have enjoyed a close working relationship at the UCT School of Dance where she has been a part-time teacher of contemporary dance technique classes for several years. I consider her work at Darkroom an exemplar of some of the new directions and intersectional thinking of choreography bubbling in the region. One of Coetzer's latest creative offerings, *autoplay*, first staged in 2024, forms a central thread of my discussion.



Caption: The work of Darkroom Contemporary appears at First Thursdays. Cape Town 2024. Photographer: Oscar O Ryan.

Pause: what are First Thursdays, who are the choreographers, claimed spaces

Coetzer's description of *autoplay* as an AI Opera with its live sampling of music constitutes for me a new kind of probing of the dance world in Cape Town and

thus an African aesthetic. How can an argument of place, belonging and roots be made by the outsider? To what extent is Coetzer an outsider in terms of her positionality and approach to dancemaking? I maintain that some South African choreographers, artist-researchers and producers are less focused on experiments with multiracialism and more on accessing varied dance languages, training patterns and styles emanating from the diverse dancers in the region. In the case of Louise Coetzer's *Darkroom Contemporary* the semiotics of movement, flexibilities in a range of dance techniques and developing their *Screendance* as a hybrid form itself is at the centre of its experimentation.

Over the past decade I have noticed how some UCT students struggle with taking a movement-based class that ostensibly originated in India, associating this with conversion to Hinduism. Interestingly, Yoga's popularity in North America is noted in Mark Singleton's study (2010) and confirms the foreign movement form and its popularity and longevity in the United States. But are such experiences of inclusion and multiplicity different in South Africa with its history of segregation, indoctrination of superior cultures and surrounding paranoia of Blackness? How are an Africanist and contemporary aesthetic being explored by South African dance-choreographers given this discourse of alterity? (Samuel, 2016) Moreover, how should innovative choreographers from South Africa respond when assaulted by questions like your contemporary dance work is 'not African enough!'. (Maqoma, 2006) How does this identity formation play itself out for black and white choreographers such as Coetzer who resists such a label in a post-apartheid and multicultural space like South Africa? Are these debates and the concerns of 'who is in control' or 'has power' still pertinent in a world seemingly gone drunk on fascism and an ever-increasing conservatism/Trumpism? What is the agency taken up by choreo-activists and how can it find support?

To return to my vexed non-yoga-participating student of 2010, and question of what it means for academics when a white student feels threatened by a perceived Hindu practice at a tertiary institution when such institutions have had a history of white racial privilege and segregation toward Black. Or worse, what is a response when students of all races refuse to engage in areas of curriculum that are not from their culture? Much has already been tested in the discourse surrounding 'cultural collisions', interculturalism and globalisation (Schechner, Bharucha, 1999, Loots, 2006) and the unequal power relationships and tensions that surface from artistic collaborations, however genteel such cultural exchange and borrowing might be. Bharucha's provocation in this debate noted that

The task of rearticulating interculturalism, therefore, involves nothing less than an acknowledgement and confrontation of its discriminations. Along with the globalising tendencies (and resistances to globalisation) embedded within intercultural practices, one needs to highlight the

'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa

blurred areas in which the agendas of inter- and multiculturalism converge, if only to separate. (1999,3)

Choreographer and teacher Sylvia Glasser (1981) based in South Africa had also written passionately around the disrespect of indigenous cultures, traditional practices and customs that has since been echoed by Maxwell Rani (2012). Glasser's coinage of 'Afrofusion' to explain some of her new work such as *Tranceformations* (first staged in 1991) that was explored by her Moving Into Dance Company based in Johannesburg may still apply to experimental, intercultural works which many choreographers in South Africa continue to undertake today. Curiously, many concert theatre dance works in South Africa since the 2020s seem less intent on adopting an African tag, opting rather for a globally ubiquitous contemporary dance label.

What does it mean to refashion oneself when a former privileged position finds itself decentred or moving towards a periphery? In what ways can or should Coetzer and others see themselves as privileged? What becomes reconciled in such confession? Much has been written about separatist and segregationist arts policies by a South African government and how they impact on arts education specifically dance (Maree L. 2004, Friedman S. 2015, Loots L. 2016) so what does this mean for complex, multifold 'Dance scene' in burgeoning new South Africa some 30 years after the collapse of apartheid? Is the same identity politics of multiculturalism and interculturalism still playing out in the new South Africa in 2025? I maintain that complex relations of power in South Africa can be understood when privilege and access are meaningfully engaged in arts experiments. This has implication for many post-independent African countries who have experienced seismic shifts in their cultural production as democratic principles became the new norm in their liberated spaces.

Rewind: how are past legacies in Dance colliding?

As a dance scholar based in South Africa and whose research interests are located in Brazil, Denmark and India, I ask whether decolonial impulses see a replacement of 'White dance' with 'Black dance'? How are South African-based choreographers forging contemporary dance, reflecting the multiple dance languages, social conventions and forms in their syncretic experiments? Have we matured enough to allow for respectful engagement with multiple dance languages, and thus are accepting of diverse cultures that coexist? I suggest that sameness and adherence to dance traditions can be a dangerous smokescreen for exclusion once more. Finally, have we turned our attention to creatives and their courageous experiments that push boundaries, invested with curiosity their rapid digital and AI tools prevalent in dance today, and which will continue to emerge in the near future? Are the old debates around power, identity and agency relevant, and to whom?

Gerard M. Samuel

The experience of those who identify as Black to say nothing of those identifying as subversive Africans needs to be understood in this era of intersections with technology. It becomes all the more significant to examine the relationship between Screendance and the multiple types of dances found in social media such as on TikTok. This article explores the 'world of Dance' in Cape Town with its centuries old and living traditions in dance and asks, "who holds the power to press play?"

Repeat: Darkroom, an exemplar of the Contemporary Dance scene in 2020s Cape Town

Darkroom Contemporary was founded by Louise Coetzer, dancer and choreographer, and Oscar O'Ryan, photographer and filmmaker, based in Cape Town. Since 2010 they have produced innovative works including *Deus: Ex:machina – human geography in a virtual world* (2020), *Shifting sands//\sand shifting* (2021), a video work which was seen at Infecting the City, and *blame it on the algorithm* (2019), which appeared at the Baxter Dance Festival. In this next section I reflect on three aspects: diverse training styles, experiments with 'chance choreography' and an Africanist aesthetic relating to Darkroom's specific and most recent works *autoplay* which I saw at the Baxter Theatre in 2025. Marketing director Fahiem Stellenboom's publicity excited me when he wrote

Darkroom Contemporary's **autoplay** (Until 29 Mar) invites you to a surreal encounter between human and machine in an immersive AI Opera directed by Louise Coetzer. This genre-defying production combines dance theatre, live art, generative soundscapes, opera, polyrhythms, and Artificial Intelligence, reimagining itself uniquely for every audience. Through satire and absurdity, autoplay boldly confronts notions of identity, agency, and manipulation in our increasingly digital world. Featuring original live music by Brydon Bolton, Inge Beckmann, and Njabulo Phungula. Don't miss this thought-provoking production. (Stellenboom F. 2025, The Baxter, What's On, Marketing, 26 March)

'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa



Caption: Darkroom Contemporary *autoplay* rehearsal in studios. March 2025. Photographer: Oscar O’Ryan.

I found *autoplay* to be a challenging ensemble work comprising dancers, opera singers and live musicians in a contemporary African setting whilst the programme noted, “*autoplay* is a surreal encounter between human and machine. The immersive performance confronts traditional notions of identity and autonomy, in an era where our lives have become intricately woven into the fabric of a digital landscape.” (2025) On the website, the pre-publicity described the show as a “collision of movement, opera, and machine intelligence” (2025). I began by asking Louise to tell me more about her performance process for *autoplay* and of the dancers’ selection into the company for this project and how she navigated their different training regimes. Coetzer responded by clarifying that Darkroom Contemporary company was borne out of several factors including her arrival in Cape Town from Pretoria’s Tshwane University where she had been studying Performance, her strong desire to engage with screen dance and her assessment of a lack of performance opportunities for dancers of varied backgrounds even though she had noted Jazzart and Cape Town City Ballet’s presence were key drivers of the birth of Darkroom. She stated, “I was interested in doing screen dance and making work that’s quite experimental, and I just wasn’t finding platforms” (2025). She expressed that “dancers need to have somewhere where they can work and actually be challenged” (2025) in terms of an interdisciplinary approach. In 2010, the Baxter Theatre again hosted its Dance Festival, and this space gave high visibility to Coetzer and her co-founder Oscar

O’Ryan’s contemporary performance work. Her observation and subtle comment of unchallenging works may stem from the powerful legacy of stalwart role-players on the local dance scene viz. Jazzart who had been in Cape Town since the mid-1970s and Cape Town City Ballet who it could be argued have been present since the 1960s. This latter company was previously known as CAPAB Ballet between 1962 -1996, and before that can trace its lineage to University of Cape Town Ballet which was established in 1934. Both these companies no doubt had dancers of varied training but typically within each of their genres i.e. ballet, and Afro-contemporary dance. The complexities of how to define a liquifying form of dance such as ‘Afro-contemporary’ within a context of the term ‘African Dance’ is herculean. The African continent presents its own interrogation of over fifty states, and thus one can expect over five hundred dance cultures. Thus, the exploration of companies such as Jazzart located in Cape Town in an apartheid era to forge, articulate and value a new dance language should be celebrated for its fortitude. What Darkroom appears to elucidate in its enthusiasm to experiment seems to be an engagement with the new tools and associated technologies. This prompted my next question.

GS: Could you tell me more about your choreographic processes or working with technology, AI tools? What prompted that?

Coetzer began by reflecting on her work which she finds is mostly ensemble and that she “work(s) with the cut-up technique, which is the (Jonathan*) Burrows” (*my addition, 2025). In referencing Burrows’ improvisation technique, she invokes his notion of multiple and individual voices as a foundational aspect of her dance-making process too. It is clear that her “mixed bag of bodies, and groundings and backgrounds and things” (2025) provide a starting point for the sharing of multiple and unique skills and other dance and performance techniques. In our interview, Coetzer spoke of the audition processes of her dancers and how that was based on their ability to cope with Darkroom’s existing repertoire and particular style, as well as possession of a strong technical base, stamina and performativity/presence, which allows for a fluid transfer of the performance work. She remarked “it (i.e. her work*) being quite visceral and quite a strong experiential response to the work because that is what I’m attempting to do. I know often the work is not easy to digest.” (*my insertion, 2025) This latter remark is linked to the often abstract nature of the work that experiments with new technologies which for uninitiated audiences may be alienating. When probed further on the relationship with audiences she clarified her stance on dance as entertainment, suggesting that it was equally valid that dance also had a role to play as escapism – “I think we also need those types of things because they feed us in a different way”. (2025) I was intrigued by her comment which I understood as a preference towards nonlinear/non narrative forms of dance. This for me relates to an abstract label for the repertoire Darkroom which includes film, performance, and screen dance.

'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa

I wanted to know more of her creative and artistic process. She replied, "I like to work with technology and trying to see how it can fortify the presentation of the work somehow or make the experience different for the audience" (2025). This she unpacked for me through the example of the use of AI tools in the development that became *autoplay*. The AI tools generated "a lot of stuff... the initial responses, I think would be very watered down, or very predictable, or not interesting at all. But it was a thing of training your robot (laughs) how to get to understand what it is I'm trying to do, and to try and treat it like a creative partner, in a sense." Traditional creative partners in dance have included composers, set designers, even librettists, so the use and status of artificial intelligence as one of the team appears as a natural next step for this South African based choreographer.

I wondered how Coetzer who is female and white in a context such as South Africa may navigate this positionality and the implications thereof for her arts company.

GS: How do you think Darkroom's work expresses an Africanist aesthetic? Would you identify as an African choreographer?

Coetzer's reply came softly and was frank when she said, "I guess I'm always like, am I allowed to. That's the ... That's always the thing. Like, am I allowed to? But this is where I am. This is where I've always lived." This sensitive stepping into a politics of identity and laying claim to an identity is a profound question for many and is reflected in the deeper and eternal 'who am I?' puzzlement. For example, as a dance researcher based in South Africa, one who has been defined as Indian during the apartheid era, I have claimed a Black South African identity in relation to my non-White status. But, for others of similar Indian lineage they embrace a 'South African Indian' label. Professors Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Singh (2017) had problematised in their article "Stuck in middle" the need

to address whether Indians and Africans fall under the rubric 'Black' in the post-apartheid period and should be treated equally, or whether there is justification for disaggregating Black into Indian, Coloured, and African. (2017, 148)

Furthermore, the debates around who becomes labelled (and by whom) as non-citizens in an increasingly troubled world filled with migrations, refugees and unwelcome immigrants reverberates until today and is located within complex and earlier settler vs native discourses explored by Mahmood Mamdani (2020) and others.

Coetzer's plea is passionate when she states "this is all that I have as a reference. So, whatever comes out, of course there's other influences of things you can see and read and so but I still believe that the people I'm working with, everyone that's collaborating on that work. They are all from here and they are all really like

bringing that groundedness of this space we are in. It's not trying to be something else." She points out that this is the place in which she finds herself, i.e. from a particular type of school and which would lead to her specific reading or formation of worldview that needs further unpacking. Such analysis could unravel questions of privilege, resources and access that surround any artist or dance maker in and outside of South Africa. Moreover, a resistance to imitate or be something else underscores a deep-rooted colonial heritage and backward glance to the West and its centres of dance viz. London and New York. The groundedness of which Coetzer speaks signals a rootedness in African soil both for herself and the dancers she selects. Thus, place is conflated with notions of taking up space or assertions by new voices in the possibilities of unknown spaces. Editors Jay Pather and Catherine Boule (2019) have unpacked such critical issues of transgression, sabotage, and other acts of subversion within the socio-cultural landscape, particularly in the post-apartheid era and those brave artists, circumstances and interlocutors who have dared to do so. Raising the debates for Live Art, Pather and Boule wrote,

Live art, experimental artmaking in front of our eyes, tries on and tries out new ways of seeing and being in the world, feeling its way forwards (sideways, backwards) into unknown spaces, stepping outside the boundaries of what is known and comfortable as it stakes out new territories and vocabularies of expression. (2019,14)

Coetzer reframed the vocabularies of *autoplay* and its aesthetic choices by explaining that her interest in

machine learning and doing what is our traditional symbols of learning, which is the blackboard and the school desk, the school table and the school shoes and the chalk and all of that stuff came into there. But the black and white also just feels like that binary code. It's zeros and ones. It's that (computer technology*) sort of feeling again. (*2025, my insertion)

I noted the uniformity of the four dancers – their monochrome costumes, a large black painted rectangular disc that could revolve on stage during the work instantiating multiple viewpoints of the charged performance environment. Their dusty chalk habitat launches in stage 4. mort (death), a marathon duet for the dancers, Darion Adams and Louisa Talbot who has a red apple lodged firmly in her mouth throughout this strenuous entanglement section. The apple referenced forbidden fruit (given my Catholic upbringing), knowledge and life trapped in the unspoken, and also made sense in terms of Erin Barrett and Jack Mingo's (2002) study of North American teachers, their remuneration and 19th century traditions of student-teacher relationships.



Caption. mort Louisa Talbott and Darion Adams. Photographer: Oscar O'Ryan

The work of Darkroom whilst justly lauded is also part of the local contemporary dance industry that must include Figure of Eight (Fo8) led by Grant van Ster and Shaun Oelf, the Jazzart Dance company, and prominent dance organisations such as the Eoan Group, and Dance For All. The latter two are termed 'community dance' spaces and have been carefully examined by Kristina Johnstone (2012) who illuminates the hierarchies in dance in the region. Johnstone's study asserts "that through community dance as an area of conflict, resistance and power, new forms of contemporary dance could emerge". (2012, 164) This conclusion traces the way community dance platforms have had to navigate the 'high art' terrain and the artistic standards prescribed by concert theatre dance rooted in an earlier colonial period. Furthermore, Johnstone rejects the notion of 'low art' and/or an othered position for community dance works, and reminds readers of the origins of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) which were the racially segregated zones and architecture of apartheid. This brutalising context gave rise to Jazzart Dance Theatre company who are recognised as the oldest contemporary dance company in South Africa, founded in 1974. As a loudly defiant multi-racial dance company during apartheid, reaching its peak under the vision and leadership of Alfred Hinkel (director from 1986 - 2010), their movement language, style, temperament and artistic approach can be found in most dance companies in the Western Cape today. Thus, a list of former dance company members and or trainees of Jazzart include Van Ster and Oelf, and Wendy Abrahams, director of and lead choreographer with CAFDA Dance company a CBNO based in the

Retreat area in Cape Town. Jazzart founder members include Sharon Friedman, leader of Silverleaf Dance Company, another CBO that was begun by Amelia du Toit. Friedman also played a significant role as Contemporary Dance Lecturer at the University of Cape Town where her teaching over a 20-year period would have coaxed generations of dancers including the Johnstone. This pattern continues in 2025 with Jacki Job, also a Jazzart founder member, though Job's journey in butoh in Japan could be described as a parallel force. And finally, Jacqueline Manyapelo, former artistic director of Jazzart (director 2010 - 2013), who has joined UCT ranks as its newest Contemporary Dance lecturer and UCT's most recently retired professor Jay Pather whose performance career is also rooted at Jazzart. These role players in their key positions can be seen either as part of an incestuous industry or powerful custodians of a proud legacy of the anarchic.

The above discussion situates some of the dominant forces of Contemporary Dance in Cape Town i.e. Jazzart since the 1970s, and UCT School of Dance since the late 1990s under Friedman, and later Celeste Botha, Janine Booysens, and Oelf, all of whom emanate from Jazzart. Allison Hendricks, current director of Dance For All, one of the largest community-based arts organisations in the city graduated from UCT as did this author in 1984. In this light, Coetzer's form of contemporary dance exploration noted earlier, coming as it did from the hinterlands of Pretoria and Johannesburg, could represent a significant change of form and approach in contemporary dance from the Cape. There have been other influences with regular visitors to UCT notably Introdans and CODARTs, both of which are based in the Netherlands which highlights a particular leaning and, more locally, Moving into Dance - Mophatong's, Vincent S. Mantsoe and Gregory Maqoma. Both Professor Gary Gordon of Rhodes University and Dr Lliane Loots of University of KwaZulu-Natal must be seen as major 'influencers' at UCT too as must *enfant terrible* Robin Orlin, critiqued and celebrated by Adrienne Sichel (2018) as a subversive storyteller and activist. But contemporary dance itself has always toyed with the notion of when exactly is the 'today dance' that is being investigated; in other words, each era hails its contemporary foray into an unknown. Consequently, it is also not a static form or movement language but rather an assemblage of dance making and performing approaches, toxic in its love affair with each new age. Coetzer had noted, "the dawn of a new age" (2025) too in her fathoming of AI and machine learning in general which points to an abiding interest in the new for many artists who may consider themselves contemporary from Cunningham, Meredith Monk to Akram Khan and Mthuthuzeli November. November began his training at Dance for All and later the Cape Performing Arts Academy (CAPA) under the leadership of Debbie Turner. Once more we can see how November as an internationally award-winning black dancer from humble roots in the Cape can retrace his contemporary dance genealogy at UCT (Turner is a UCT graduate).

Fast forward: Tracking power differentials and the future

'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa

Coetzer had earlier on in our interview intimated some of the worrying concerns of AI: the use of algorithms, persuasive powers and a slow creep and erasure of free will. She said, "it's also I think affecting our ability to have free will and make choice about things" (2025). In her view, everyone is "actually learning how to navigate this new world in ... because it is changing and it's changing at a rate that a lot of us are not aware of that. And that we also know there is some part of not having control over it" (2025). These evince not an expected panicked response but rather her entry into her creative and workshopping space with fellow artists. In line with this lateral thinking and amplification of AI as a somewhat disengaged issue for choreographers and her peers, I next asked Coetzer, where are some of the places that the company has been touring and what were Darkroom and her plans for the future? Coetzer replied "The National Arts Festival, Vrystaat KunsteFees, Kucheza (Afrika) Festival, at The State Theatre (Pretoria), those are the major ones we kind of regularly do and then smaller platforms ... to PACE - Pan African Creative Exchange" (2025). In my research I have since noted performances at the prestigious Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCCA), based at Cape Town's landmark V& A Waterfront, and the Norval Foundation in this city as well as forays to the Pan African Telematic Art Project, Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria. Given Darkroom's portability, its Screendance works have reached festival audiences in many parts of the globe, notably at the Bucharest International Dance Film Festival, Cinedans Festival in the Netherlands, the London Global Film Festival, POOL Movement Art Festival in Berlin, Germany, Ubumuntu Arts Festival in Kigali, Rwanda and Agite Y Sirva in Oaxaca, Mexico, to name a few. I probed the question of such international visibility further and noticed a relative absence of cities and countries in the East (Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia). Coetzer cautiously observed that phenomenon, too. We agreed about the easy flow of information across the internet but were unclear as to what extent the flying of material within our shared time zones of Amsterdam and Copenhagen affected the reception by audiences located in zones with a notable time difference.

This arrival reintroduced the discourse of power, perceptions of standards - of products including artistic products that are made in Africa. Just as 'Made in China' labels once signalled for some inferior quality and disposability, is a global market receptive towards a new South Africa in all its messy diversity? The 'touristic gaze' articulated one step further through a further gendered lens by Mahesvari Naidu (2009) highlights how the tropes of the exotic and effects of colonialism still linger. How can Coetzer and others work be recognized as cutting edge contemporary dance from South Africa? Perhaps we need to 'press play' to find out.

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Gerard M. Samuel

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'Press play': contemporary dance in Cape Town, South Africa

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