



Djoniba Dance
By Jan Schmidt



With some twenty-five other people I'm facing the mirror, lifting my knees to waist level, raising my arms up and down African style. We're performing a simple dance step from Senegal. The warm-up started five minutes ago and already I'm sweating, breathing hard, and very thirsty.

Occasionally, while swinging my head to the left and right, I catch a flash of the class in the mirror. It's like a camera pan shot by a drunken amateur.

My arm sweeps back and brushes up against the woman next to me; the contact disturbs her, but she tosses me a fleeting smile before we are lost in the movement again.

Facing us at the head of this long room is Djoniba, a powerfully built man with a shaved head wearing a form-fitting tee-shirt which advertises his dance studio as well as his well-muscled body. He demonstrates the step, creating angles and forces that I can only guess at.

We throw our arms out in opposition to our feet, swinging wide, stepping high, over and over. We vary in age, size, ability, ethnicity. We come from many dancing backgrounds and it shows in how we move: the ones with ballet training hold their backs straight and their feet in penguin-like turnout, presenting themselves in a theatrical way; yoga practitioners bend like pretzels, moving as though some inner force directed them; modern dancers flail their arms, driven by a need to express themselves; while the totally untrained, like me, simply do the best we can. Men, women. People in shape, out of shape. Talented or unable to keep a beat. Everyone. The music from the CD player fills the room, our heads. The African sound—the drums, the *balo*, the voices, moving us from one space to another, without the Western structure to guide us, just the music, swelling, falling, winding around and through itself—takes us somewhere else entirely.

Near the studio, the new high-rise medical center where my boyfriend went for radiation treatments towers over Union Square Park. The park is insulated from the megastores—Barnes & Noble, The Wiz, Staples, Starbuck's—by the farmers' market with baskets of fruit and vegetables and flats brimming with the green, purple and gold of plants. On up Broadway, small shops add to the old bazaar-like atmosphere of the area: one, barely six feet square, is lined with a waterfall of flowing gold chains; the next is ablaze with green, yellow and red Jamaican hats, incense and African statues; a tiny shop blares remixed tapes of hip-hop and rap. At the corner bodega I buy a giant bottle of water while tapping my feet to the high, fluty sounds of Arabic music. I open my hand so the bored saleswoman can drop the coins into my palm without ever having

to touch me—New York custom.

After the Kleinsleep store on the corner of 18th Street, comes a new upscale Peruvian restaurant, Chicama, with its rustic planked door painted barn-red and held together with large metal hinges. Djoniba's entrance reveals none of the excitement going on above; non-descript chrome and glass doors open into an empty lobby at 37 East 18th. I poke the #7 buzzer. Down the dark street, slick from our recent rain, the red neon sign of the Old Town Tavern calls to me. As the buzzer sounds and I pull the door back towards me, it yanks back faster than I am pulling it. Over my head, a black hand grasps the chrome edge of the door. I turn and smile. One of the drummers. We go in together.

On the elevator we're crammed in with eight others, a little rising microcosm-on-a-rope of the city: drummers greet each other in French, two women quietly whisper in Italian, a pair of girls toss off valley-girl dialect, one Japanese, the other Middle-Eastern. I hear Nadhiyr, an old friend from another life, speaking Spanish to another drummer. He is dressed completely in white, minus his well-trimmed goatee. I smile at him, "You shaved." He says, "Yeah, I was just initiated." I don't ask which religion, assuming Santería, because he usually drums in the Cuban classes.

Inside I add my name to the sign-up list and pay my twelve dollars for a class in beginning African dance. Abdullah Djoniba Mouflet, owner of Djoniba's Dance and Drum Centre, is from Martinique. He drummed and danced with some of the most internationally renowned dance companies from West Africa, including the National Ballet of Guinea and Mudra Afrique and maintains close friendships with the dancers and choreographers of those companies. Before founding Ballet D'Afrique Djoniba in 1990, he performed with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. In the spring of 1993, he opened this new dance studio which also offers classes in African drumming or other styles of dance: Haitian, Afro-Cuban, Mamba-Salsa, Capoeira, Dunham technique, House, Hip-hop, Indian-Katha, Kung-fu, Belly Dance, or even ballet, but most of the classes are West African.

After squeezing through the hall, past more drummers and dancers, to the small changing room, I pull back the *kinte* cloth and step into a room full of half-naked women tugging sweaters over their heads, pulling leotards on, and wrapping multi-colored African print fabric around their hips. The smell of sweat and fruity body lotions intensifies the harem-like intimacy.

Gwen, an African-American woman with long locked hair, spreads her long brown legs apart and bends her knees to tie her fabric so that it has the right amount of play. She tells me about her grown children,

her new marriage to an African man, whose last name I thought was Diallo, but is spelled, Djallo. Katherine Arnoldi, author of *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom*, surprises me from behind. We hug and laugh. She introduced me to African dancing. Kristin and Martha bound in, both over six feet tall, white ex-basketball players with a lanky, sports-like way of dancing. Sweating and laughing from having just finished a Haitian dance class with Carolyn Webb, they each slap my hand in a hearty hello.

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Carolyn's class is too early for me to take, but I love Haitian dancing. It is softer than African, less athletic, more spine rippling and closer to the ground. Recently New York City lost several of its most prized Haitian dance teachers, including the master teacher Jean Léon Destiné, still directing and dancing with his own company, but retired from teaching classes except for special occasions. And Judith Samuel left to get her Ph.D. in Florida. Bonga, who led the drums for her classes, had a delicate complicated style which mixed well with Judith's more spiritual way of teaching. After her two-minute break between the forty-minute warm-up and the next hour of dancing across the floor, she would tell us what the dances mean, which steps go with which rhythms, how they relate to the gods. Then she'd turn down the lights, turn off the fans, and, letting everyone know that there would be no more talking, lead us across the floor in wild, complicated combinations with her hair swinging and her statuesque, glorious woman figure moving like a goddess in a trance towards the drums.

Thankfully, Julio Jean and Carolyn Webb are still teaching. Carolyn Webb used to teach with Frisner Augustin's louder, harder striking drumming. She gives a really great stretch, helps us learn the songs, and also explains the dances, like Ibo, the dance of pride and freedom. We extend our arms as if we were tied to our neighbors. We dance with tiny bound-feet slave steps. We burst open our arms and break the chains.

Carolyn says, "Break the chains of whatever binds you: the world, your psychology, other people, desires." Her dancing is robust, energetic and directly theatrical. Her small, toned body explodes with sheer joy in motion.

Julio Jean, a Haitian, teaches beginning and intermediate classes. The form of his intermediate classes is the same as the beginning classes, but the steps get more complicated, the pace faster and the combinations more difficult. He has a swaying, lilting style of dancing that makes you feel like a soft island breeze yourself.

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In unison with the others, I'm rolling my spine up to sitting and back down to flat again, forty times already. The circling African arm movements help to bring us all upright in these full sit-ups, then flat, then upright, then flat. My stomach muscles are screaming in rebellion, lungs ready to burst, heart pumping fast as a hummingbird's wings inside my chest. We're doing the floor exercises. More people have come in, so the studio is crammed, dancers jigsawed into any available space, unable to form straight rows. Djoniba's chestnut skin glistens as he merrily does his sit-ups, radiant in glorious physical health, wearing that sadistic smile dance teachers relish. He calls out "just 200 more, come on, you can do it."

It's a joke, but he keeps going. Up, down, up, down, up, down. Our unison is deconstructing; women and men are beginning to give up, no more up, only down, down, down, gasping, laughing and exhausted. And suddenly, the medicine I came here to get kicks in, and I am renewed. I can do it. And I, too, like Djoniba, begin to grin. After all, I'm ten to twenty years older than most of the class. Delight washes over me. It's a triumph to be over fifty and still be able to feel the joy in my body.

But there is no time to revel in my success, I catch Djoniba's shaved brown head bending to each knee and now I'm doing crunches. Now I'm doing scissor kicks. Now I'm on my knees lifting my leg straight out behind me, up, up, up.

Finally Djoniba changes the tempo for a stretch. With my legs straight out in front of me, I can rest my head on my knees. My tee-shirt is sticking to my back with sweat, but this feels like heaven. We roll up with our spines and turn diagonally to bend forward again, unfolding our arms out to the floor as though we are honoring some god.

When the floor stretch is over, Djoniba grasps an invisible rope with his right hand and pulls himself up to standing in one smooth movement. The class does the same, but our ropes are often not quite strong enough to hold our weight and we have to resort to less attractive means of rising. He gets us moving again, this time building the movements till we are going so fast only a few dancers can keep up. Next it's jumping time. First, hands flat to our sides, we jump straight up like arrows. Four times. Next we bend forward and this time when we jump we pull our legs up into our chests, so our bodies are farther off the floor. Four times. Finally we add our arms, shooting out from where they are crossed on our chests to full wing spread on our sides. This time when we jump, high in the air, legs pulled in, chest wide, arms thrown open, we're flying.

Finally Djoniba signals that it's time for a short recess. The class breaks up and I head over to where I stashed my water and *glug* it down. A little of the wet coolness spills down my chin and I smear it over my face.

I speak to a woman, four months pregnant. She says the baby is quiet when she dances, but when she tries to relax, he starts up, kicking and wrestling around. We toss out a few more pleasantries then drift off.

People stand about or sit on the floor in small groups talking. Others sit or stand alone. One is doing yoga, standing on one foot holding the other out behind her with her arm, head back, her spine forming a gracious curve. A woman stretches her calves, trying to correct for an injury.

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Vado Diomande, world famous drummer from the Cote D'Ivoire and artistic director of Kotchegna Dance Company, sets up his drum and hits it a few times with the flat of his fingers. He teaches the dance class just before Djoniba's. Just an hour ago, after I changed my clothes, I swished back the curtain to the hallway and squeezed through the incoming traffic to watch the end of Vado's class. He dances with an intense look in spite of his wide grin. Bending his stocky frame forward, he swings his arms, steps and leaps, leading his class in what is simple for him, but a struggle for the dancers. When he sees me watching, he graces me with his big smile.

There is another dancer from the Cote D'Ivoire, Justin, who teaches class on Wednesdays just before Julio Jean's Haitian class. I try to get there early just to watch him. Last week, through the window, the drummers, nine of them, were already heated up, pounding away on the skins, muscled arms held out from their bodies, faces smiling, sweat swinging. Vado and one other drummer had their *djembe's* strapped over their shoulders so they could move around with the drum between their legs. The others, except one standing behind his drum executing resounding heavy beats with a stick, were seated before their instruments, pounding the warmed up skins with lightning fast hands.

Near the elevator, a commotion erupts over the arrival of Papa Ladji Camara, one of the best drummers in the world, tiny in old age, smiling in his long African robe and *kinte* cloth skullcap, surrounded by a group of people paying homage. Then Tall John, a white dance student with a head of silver hair, arrives and tells me he hit sixty last week. He adds that after the last operation, he isn't supposed to dance,

but he can't stop, he'll die if he does. He takes class everyday, in spite of the endless series of medical operations for his various types of cancer. Beth, with her silvery blond hair piled high on her head, hugs me and says she's taking the Brazilian class. She hands me a flyer for her all female band, *Mulher da Samba*.

Looking through the window, I say, "God, Justin is a beautiful dancer."

John says, "Yeah, it's like he has springs in his legs." Slim and short and dark skinned, Justin stands at one end of the room before his six students. He bounces his hand up and down, patting the air to signal a tempo change to the drummers, who, though madly knocking off their polyrhythms, keep an eye on Justin. They adjust the tempo slightly. Justin, not breaking a sweat, unlike the rest of the class whose clothes are all mottled with darker wet areas, begins: bounce bounce bounce with his hands until the dancers nod in time to the music, bounce bounce bounce again and, suddenly, on the first beat of the phrase, he kicks his right leg straight, claps his hands under the leg, steps down to the right, kicks with a little step on his left foot, turns around, jumps high in the air, and begins the second step, bounce, bounce, bounce, quick step to the right, twirl, swerve, dip, step step, hop. And he starts the third step. The dancers do what he does, but they don't look like him. Even the best can't come close to his lightness, his precision and his spring. With a gentle touch he corrects them, urging them to lower the shoulders, or open up the hands, or lift the elbows. Flat foot, low center of gravity. Step, step step. Like this. All without words, only see, do. No way to talk over the drums.

The class follows him in lines up to the drummers and turns back for another series of steps. He does have springs in his legs. And in his shoulders and everywhere. He hops so high, and kicks so wide that he becomes one form after the other, each more beautiful than the last, dancing with clarity and brightness.

Finally Justin calls all the students to form a semi-circle in front of the drummers. The guys born in West Africa lead, but there are also African-Americans and white Americans, hands flying, faces sweating, smiling, as they pound out the various interwoven rhythms. Justin smiles at them, waits till just the right moment and dances alone till the drummers come to their final rumbling crash. In a spontaneous outbreak of joy, the dancers burst into wild, grateful applause.

The students pick up their coats and purses where they'd left them piled against the long wall.

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Dancers for the next class rush in. The room is steamy and hot, good for the muscles, and in my bare feet, I slip in the wetness on the floor from their perspiration.

The drummers for my class, the same ones who drummed for Justin, are now almost set up, sitting on metal folding chairs. Djoniba walks to his spot in the front of class and we all rise and form lines the length of the room facing the mirror. He stands straight, flat footed, till we are all standing straight, bare feet flat. Then he bends forward in an exaggerated motion, and we all eagerly bend forward. He swings his right foot up and over the left and plunks it down hard. We do too. He picks up that same foot and puts it back next to the left again. We do too. He sticks it to the side, heel down, toe up, he returns it to its place. Then out. Then in. We do it too. He puts the foot to his back, and returns it. He turns around and looks at us, eyes wide, asking if we get it. Yes, we nod, understanding that this is the series that forms the first step.

Now we repeat this over and over, slowly, till he feels we have it, then we do it with the opposite foot. Once he sees that we have this, he motions for the drummers to begin and the muggy room is filled with the energy of nine drummers. When Djoniba is pleased with the tempo he looks back at us and demonstrates the arm movements that go with the feet: arms swing around the head for the crossing step, out and away from the body for the side steps and both arms go up over your head in a circle for the back step. When we have the arms right, he puts the arms and feet together.

Now he speeds us up, twice as fast as before. We're moving to the music, finally dancing. But he stops us. He mimics us moving in a stiff manner without using the rest of our bodies. He shakes his head to the left and right, NO. He does it again, this time adding the head movements, which flow naturally from the shoulder and hip thrusts and every muscle in his body is dancing, precisely, exquisitely.

So we try. And we try and we try and we try. Finally Djoniba stops us and teaches another step. Then another. Then another. We put them together. But I've forgotten the first one already. So he shows us again, and now I'm remembering the steps, my body internalizing the order, the movement, and I'm dancing, almost without thinking, responding to the rhythms of the drums that I couldn't consciously pick out.

Djoniba stops us again to listen to the drums. Out of the mesh of the conversations between them comes one distinct rhythm. When he hears it, Djoniba points his fingers, and when it's over he sings it: Bambambe-

dele, bam, bam, bam. Then the drums play it and we sing it. This is the phrase that will signal when to switch steps so we remain in unison with each other and the drums; we have to recognize it.

He teaches us four more steps so that we have a pattern of eight steps: a combination, a dance. He goes over all eight again. Some know all of them. I remember a few steps, but other steps haven't gotten into my body memory yet.

Djoniba has us form lines, three across, facing the drums. The drummers function differently for this last section of class. So far they have been a service to the teaching of the steps, but now, they are going to make us dance, make us really communicate with each other, with them, with the spirit of the drums. Djoniba straps on his drum, takes the drummer stance, which is basically the same position as the dancers', bent from the waist, center of gravity low in the gut, ready to spring in any direction, forward, back, side to side, up or down. And that's what we are about to do.

The drums speak to each other, call, respond, solo, strut. The spirit moves through the drums into the drummers. Like all art, like life, the process is dialogue, between the artist and the art, the drummers and the dancers, the dancers and the music. The monologue in my head, which consumed me before I got here, vanishes with the swaying of my hips and the tapping of my feet.

Djoniba and another drummer face each other. Djoniba beats out a rhythm, smiling, posing, demonstrating his ability and talent. Confident, proving God's bounty with his expression of pride and style and proficiency. Talking to all of us. Opening up the space for all of us to have pride and confidence. The other drummer responds with a different rhythm, complicated, interwoven, going somewhere else entirely, then suddenly bringing it back to where it started and laughing, pulling all the drummers into the song now, and they are all together, beating a huge powerful sound, coming round and round and round, and Bambambedele, bam, bam, bam.

I was listening so intently I forgot to start dancing, but quickly I follow the dancers ahead of me and connect the music to the steps. This time I hear the change. Remembering the next step, my feet and arms change with the music, and a sense of community fills the room, all these people, moving in the same steps to the same beat, but with their own individual styles and abilities and eccentricities. The drummers drive us, connecting to us with a invisible ribbon of pulse, the god in the drums touching each of us, and Bambambedele, bam, bam, bam, it's time to switch. One movement after the other, and suddenly it's

the final Bambabede, bam, bam, bam, which the better dancers emphasize with an arrogant, isolated hip thrust at the drummers.

Now we stand by to watch the drummers. I've heard people complain about this, saying it's wasting dance time to witness the drummers showing off. I said to that person, "I wait for that part of the class so I can catch my breath." But that wasn't really true. Watching the drummers is part of the dance, listening is essential and, though the pride and playfulness can seem self-serving, they are really gifts that show us how we too can live. Suddenly I realize, I just had a thought, the first one since the drumming began. I have been purely concentrating on dancing; I've been in the present this whole time.

Bambabede, bam, bam, bam. The gravitational spin of the drums throws that thought out of my head. I'm dancing again. The drums are pushing us, driving us to dance harder, fuller, making all the muscles in our bodies wake up and call out that we are alive.

Step, step, step. Step, step, step. Toss my head, swing my arms. Do it again. In the repetitions I have plenty of time to ask myself: why did I come here on a Friday evening? I could be home in bed watching TV; instead I got off the train at Fourteenth Street and dragged myself here to batter my body.

But this isn't battering. When Djoniba first walked in and told us to stand up and I took that initial deep breath, my body filled up with the slow inhale and lengthened as I raised my arms to the sky. Then it collapsed as I let the air out, rolled down, and placed my hands flat on the floor. With that cycle of slowed-down, concentrated breath, the day's stresses loosened, and I knew exactly why I was here.

Bambabede, bam, bam, bam.

Our communal dancing is over, but the drummers keep on drumming, offering time for soloists. One very slim young black woman jumps in, does the steps from the class, thin arms racing in space, drawing circles of energy, feet pounding and stomping beats of pure matter, ending with the quick, sharp hip thrust before moving back into the throng. A white guy, medium build, brown hair, dances into the center and stomps and jumps and thrusts his chest back and forth, arms rising totemically with the movement.

Bambabede, bam, bam, bam, he switches steps and sways back into the crowd.

Djoniba holds out his arm, inviting anyone else to dance. As this is a beginners' class, people are afraid to dance alone, so no one does. He sees me and takes my hand in his warm, muscled palm. Basking in his attention, but horrified to be alone in front of the group, I glue my eyes to him as he executes a very

simple step so that I can follow him. It's as though I'm buoyed up by his energy and his rhythm. My legs and arms mimic his for a few phrases and as long as I have him leading me, I dance. Then, returning his gaze to his drummers, he strikes a new beat and lets me go, on my own. I lose the focus, confuse one step with another and find myself awkwardly missing the beat. Quickly, I touch the floor out of respect for the drums and dance back into the protection of the circle where the other dancers are clapping and shouting for me.

Djoniba unstraps his drum, bends and touches the floor, signaling the end of class and the saluting of the drums. We line up single file moving towards the drummers, clapping to the rhythms, hips swaying, feet moving to the beats. As we approach the drums we bend forward and touch the ground to give homage to the spirit of each drum. Still the drummers don't stop, but Djoniba is in control of the twisting, whirring rhythms winding over, under and around each other. Suddenly, bam, one hard beat and they all stop simultaneously, except for Djoniba, who smiles, nods, hands still tapping the rhythm. He pulls the drummers back in for a final few thunderous measures in unison, so that at the last stroke, BAM, all together, they end and we clap madly.

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The drums go on ringing in my ears as I gulp my water. In the crowded hallway I slip back into my shoes, put on my sweater and jacket. The entry is packed with more dancers and drummers pushing in for the next class. I shove myself and my bags through them and onto the elevator where everyone is bursting with smiles. A young woman says that it's too much with all the people taking class these days. I say, "Djoniba is going to have to start a chain of dance studios. It used to be that there were bars and churches on every corner, soon we'll have Starbucks and Djoniba's on every corner." They laugh.

At the first floor, we all tumble out of the elevator. I stand by myself in the entry way to zip up my jacket. I remember the drummer who entered at the same time I came in and I think of Amadou Diallo, an African man shot forty-one times by police officers who couldn't tell the difference between a thug and an innocent, incense-seller on his way home. He was "other."

But New York is a city of others.

I'm alone again, walking out into the cold streets of Manhattan. Above me the buildings inscribe their outline against the dark sky. A hand appears. A door opens. The "other" and the "I" dissolve into "we," and all the space we need is created. ■