

*'Doors are opening.
We just need to kick a little harder.'*

The words with which Jade Schiff, Roots & Routes director, closed off the first international Mind Ur Step meeting resonated with many in the audience. The urgency to keep kicking doors open – and a little harder now – was also present in what Jolanda Spoel, from MAAS Theatre, had to say at the meeting:

*'We need to thicken our roots. We are almost expired –
we need the next generation to take the next steps!'*

Luckily it will still be quite a few years before the first generation of dance makers, programmers, dancers and choreographers of urban styles will retire. They grew up with hiphop culture, and likewise it has grown up with them. There is still a lot to be done but at the same time, a new generation should now step up and make themselves heard.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

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It is fitting that **Alida Dors** was the first keynote of the Mind Ur Step kick-off. She has been a frontrunner of urban culture, notably theatre and dance, in theatres in the Netherlands since the early start. During the MUS kick-off she shared her personal story as a hiphop artist in mainstream arts and culture. Alida's company, Backbone, now receives structural funding from the Dutch government - a sign that her work is being recognized for its contribution to Dutch arts and culture. Alida has worked hard for this recognition. She grew up in a western (modern) dance world even though her roots were in hiphop. She always felt underrepresented in theatre programs. Then she took what she had from home, hiphop, and decided to take it seriously. At theatre company 020 she was recognized and given the chance to develop it further in her own way. Now years down the line it seems that the artistic urgency of her work in the current landscape is now recognized, something that will hopefully break barriers for others as well. One of the main challenges that Alida faces now is the stigma that surrounds hiphop. It is no longer the stigma of not being 'real art' that it had before, but that hiphop is only for young people. Hiphop has grown up and so has its first generation.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

The core of Alida's keynote, however, lay in the power of hiphop, including dance, as a tool for social change. Where hiphop is her artistic attitude, curiosity is her tool. Feeling a need to speak on behalf of her own world and peers, she took street art and put it into the black box of theatre in order to tell stories. Stories with a different context and techniques but with the hiphop attitude still intact. She felt a need to address things like social inequality and to give a voice to societal debates that concern everyone. Hiphop, she says, creates a meeting space. The hiphop attitude, once so controversial, grew up with the first generations and they took it to a new level. 'We should be taken seriously. And that starts here, with ourselves.'

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'Are you serious?' This is a question that **Nabil Ouadj** has had to address often in his long and colourful career so far. It was asked when he wanted to be a dancer, when he wanted to put hiphop dance on a theatre stage, and when he wanted to include a car/truck in a performance. That he took his art so seriously was a bit of a fluke to begin with, because what he started with as a boy was not art at all; it was sports. It wasn't until many years later that he realised that he was an artist. He would dance with a group of friends, mainly Bboying, and

only when they won a prize and were asked to perform in Paris, did Nabil understand the power of their choreography and the sensibility that they had as hip-hop artists. (Incidentally this was also the first time he saw white people dance – a fact that is quite telling about the relationship between hip-hop and dance in theatres.) And even then he was asked ‘Are you serious?’ about his dancing. He pursued and received a master’s degree, just in case, and found that his academic studies only made him more confident about what he was doing with his dancing buddies. Practice, Nabil stresses, is stronger than theory. However, this combination of street and university has been central to his development as a dancer and choreographer.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

When Nabil makes a production for theatre stage, he is not there to sell something. His main aim is to share something, to touch people with what he has to bring. It is therefore tragic that so many people don’t feel at home in theatres. There is a level of discrimination that makes it uncomfortable for many. His own company, Racines Carées (square roots), is based on breaking those barriers: the *racines* (roots) indicate that the – often invisible – roots are usually bigger than what shows on the surface, the *carées* (square) addressed the boxed-in nature of people’s perception. The most important thing we have, Nabil says, is sharing. What we offer is our Frenchness: it is in our roots – the roots grow and then they open up into something that wasn’t there before.



Photo by Guido Bosua

Nabil very clearly chose to dance, even if he did not recognize it as such at the beginning. For **Jonzi-D**, there was no choice: dancing is embedded in his family identity. Music and dance are still a solid part of his family's culture, albeit not necessarily hip-hop styles. It wasn't until 1979 when he heard *Rapper's Delight* by The Sugarhill Gang that he found something that belonged only to him, and that set him apart from his brothers. His early experience as the 'MC' during theatre performances fitted neatly into hip-hop culture where there is also an absence of the 4th wall. Hip-hop is a holistic culture and in the beginning all the artists did everything: rap, dance, MC, graffiti, fashion, etc.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

Consequently, the concept of 'urban dance' does not come from hip-hop culture. It is a construct from outside. That is not necessarily a bad thing but we need to be aware of this: we have to learn the value and background of our own culture. This is also true for what hip-hop culture can do for theatre: modern and contemporary dance are not modern or contemporary anymore, they have been around for a long time. In many ways, the hip-hop (or urban) developments are the future of theatre: this is where exciting artistic developments are taking place. The cooperative nature of hip-hop makes it ever-changing and something that everyone, including a new theatre audience, can share: every person in hip-hop culture adds to it, in fact has a responsibility to do so. Jonzi is currently working on opening the first HipHop Academy where young hip-hop artists (years 16-19) can follow a practical foundation course to up the theory behind hip-hop.

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The kick-off meeting proved to be an excellent opportunity for networking and exchange. Within the speed date sessions dancers and choreographers were coupled with representatives from theatres, funds and other organisations in order to learn from each other and figure out how to not necessarily re-distribute the cake, but to make the whole cake a bit bigger.

During the speed dates, project organisers spoke with funding agencies. Dancer/choreographers spoke with theatres representatives. And everybody listened. We heard how Lloyd Marengo intended to spend the prize money he won with Bright Richards.

We heard Jaekwon (Youngung Sebastian Kim) explain about the scene in Austria and the challenges he and his peers were facing.

We heard about criteria (strict!) and critiquing (we should develop our own skills and not depend on others') and building your own infrastructure when you get tired of waiting for your 'chance' to fit into a structure that doesn't suit you anyway. We heard about how funds are struggling to accommodate applications that do not quite fit the mould – and how hard it is for them to change the mould.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

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Not quite fitting the mould was one of the themes of the panel discussion. Mike Fenton, director of CONTACT theatre in Manchester, tried to take on this challenge by establishing direct lines with what happens outside his theatre walls. His program team includes people from outside the regular theatre framework and they establish the rules and criteria. Something similar is done by Jolanda Spoel at MAAS where young people's voices are included in the theatre programming. There is an equal opportunity to use the spaces in the building.

Guillherme Miotto (choreographer) is also concerned with equality, in his case from a purely artistic perspective. His work with BBoys has been solely artistically driven. He doesn't 'shop around' for interesting additions to his work but rather takes BBoy'ing very seriously: in his view it has the same value as ballet or contemporary dance.

Tunde Adefioye from KVS in Brussels injected the argument of decolonisation into the discussion: unlike in Guillermo's work, most of the time there is a value discrepancy between styles. It is vital that the theatre as a whole recognizes this and works to counter its effects.

Alida adds that this phenomenon is noticeable for example when the term 'hiphop choreographer' is used: it immediately throws up a lot of questions and prejudice. Alida herself is a frontrunner and a role model to change this image. After all, when you're the only one, you instantly become a role model whether you like it or not. What is needed, are allies: especially with gatekeepers. The burden of change needs to be shared with them; they need to step away from what they already know.



Photo by Jeanet Kwami-agyarko

A more systemic change is called for by Matt Fenton (CONTACT theatre Manchester) and Jonzi D (Breakin' Convention) who advocate putting the right people in the right places so that artists don't need to explain anymore what hip-hop is in the first place. Only then will they be taken seriously. Jolanda Spoel believes that this is also a matter of time. Things have changed over time but, as Lloyd Marengo sighs, very slowly – almost as if people don't want this change in the first place.

This reluctance to change can be felt most pressing in application processes for financial support. The process is complicated and not suited to urban target groups. More often than not applicants give up and try to find alternative ways to finance productions. While this also works, it also gives them an unfair disadvantage when trying to put their productions on stage.

John Agesilas from Summerdance Forever has stopped caring if he is taken seriously: he sees it as his role to educate the establishment, rather than the other way around.

IN THE END WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO IS COURAGE: TO TAKE A CHANCE WITH NEW AND UNKNOWN MAKERS IN DANCE AND THEATRE. PROGRAMMERS, FESTIVALS AND THEATRES NEED TO BE BRAVE AND BE PIONEERS - AND OPEN THE DOORS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION.



Photo by Guido Bosua

The kick-off was not all talk, though. Mind Ur Step is even more about making it happen; a group of twelve young professional dancers from four countries are working together on making a production to appear on multiple stages in and possibly even outside Europe. During the kick-off the audience were given a preview of the first collaborative creative sessions that took place in that same week. In addition, Sheyda Darab gave a preview of her solo production Treasures of Mysteries. Her choreography intends to build a bridge between contexts, audiences, focuses and words.

**THE MIND UR STEP PRODUCTION IS EXPECTED TO PREMIER ON NOVEMBER
2018 IN LA ROCHELLE, FRANCE AND WILL TOUR THROUGHOUT EUROPE DURING
SPRING 2019**

**mind
ur
step**

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