

A life of JAZZ

Jazz artist Dollie Henry launched her company BOP (Body of People) in 1996. She talks to **Alison Kirkman** about her lifelong search for jazz as an art form, and her campaign for it to be recognised as such in the UK

As soon as I met Dollie Henry her enthusiasm and passion for dance was apparent, as was her warmth of character. “Stop me if I go on too much,” she laughed. I couldn’t; so inspiring was her story that I was more than happy just to sit back and listen.

Born in Bridgwater, Somerset, in 1962 and raised in Northampton, Dollie began dancing at the age of four, “My mum thought it would be good for my health, as I suffered from chronic bronchitis, she also thought it would help my deportment and sense of self.” She speaks highly of her classical training, “My formal training was all classical dance; I trained and was examined in RAD and ISTD ballet, and I am so grateful because I realise that’s what has kept me going. In my wildest idealistic dream I wanted to be a ballerina but I soon realised that wasn’t going to be a possibility. It wasn’t really seen at that time that black dancers could be ballet dancers, but I understood that.

“My parents were very into their jazz music so, from an early age, I was very jazz orientated. I would listen to Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Tatum, all these wonderful jazz composers and singers. What I never saw was the dance that went with it. I could hear the music and the vocals and I knew you could dance to it, I just didn’t know how or where to find it.

“I didn’t start to dance jazz or tap until I was around 11 but I was deadly serious from a very young age about making a career out of being a dancer. I was totally supported too. I was very

lucky to have parents who saw my enthusiasm and my progression. I was the child in

the playground carrying around a tape recorder of my favourite music and demanding that everyone danced ‘Dollie style’.”

Fast-forward just eight years and, with dance and ISTD teaching qualifications from Laine Theatre Arts under her belt, Dollie was already assistant director of the Olivier Briac company in France. “As well as giving me the opportunity to travel around Europe, Briac was probably one of the first people that I felt really took me seriously. He allowed me to be all the things that I could be at that time in my life and in my early career. I learned how to light, how to sew a costume, all the fundamental things I think dancers take for granted today. It’s not just about getting on stage; it’s about how you prepare yourself and how everything works. I think those were the formative years that allowed me to realise ‘I’m not just going to be a dancer, I like leading, I am a leader and this person has given me the opportunity to show that.’

“I already knew when I left college that there was no opportunity for me to go into a jazz company. They didn’t exist in England. It was hard to understand why because everywhere else I’d been and have been since, jazz is understood as an art form, but here it was slowly just being pushed to the commercial

arena and I didn’t want to do that.”

However, going down the commercial route was her only option at the time, so she took it and has no regrets: “On leaving Briac I worked for Dougie Squires. He had seen me at college and took me under his wing, teaching me what it was to work as a dancer behind the TV camera, in front of the TV camera and to choreograph for screen rather than stage. He was the first person to suggest I go into musicals. So, after auditioning for him again later down the line, he gave me the part of Helene in the musical *Sweet Charity* – the only black part in the whole musical. I was delighted. I’d watched *Sweet Charity* as a child and I thought ‘one day I’m going to be able to do that’. It was really beneficial. It prepared me to put on a show, to understand what it is to work with a team of people, and to be the company director that I am now.”

As a teacher Dollie has worked with countless companies in the UK and all over the world. “I took my examinations at Laine Theatre Arts and I knew they would be useful because as soon as you start choreographing or directing you’re inevitably teaching. I think it’s really important as a dancer also to have teaching as back up just in case. There might be a period when you’re injured or something

