

ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans. Welcome to The 'D' Word podcast, where we work to demystify dance. Forms of movement have been practiced since time immemorial. I'm here to reveal insights into why physical expression matters, what it does in our bodies when we watch it, and how it lives within our daily lives. This season, our theme is transformation- transforming relationships, identity, our way of thinking and social hierarchies through movement. How does dance do this? Let's dive in and find out. I am thrilled to be speaking with Cassa Pancho, MBE. A Member of the Order of the British Empire, Founder and Artistic Director of Ballet Black, of Trinidadian and British parents, Cassa founded Ballet Black in 2001 after graduating from professional dance training. Her initial goal was to provide role models to young, aspiring Black and Asian dancers. Almost 25 years later, the company has grown to a professional ballet company for international dancers of Black and Asian descent, appearing internationally to critical acclaim. To date, Cassa has commissioned over 40 choreographers to create over 60 new ballets for the company. Hi Cassa, I am so happy to have you here joining us.

CASSA PANCHO: Thank you very much for having me.

ARIA EVANS: Where in the world are we meeting you from today?

CASSA PANCHO: I am in London at our studio, and the dancers are all having a day off because we just had a performance. So it's just me here.

ARIA EVANS: Wow, an empty studio. You've probably spent a lot of time in those walls doing a lot of things alone. [Laughs].

CASSA PANCHO: I do.

ARIA EVANS: So for our listeners, I just wanted to contextualize this conversation because there's just really inspiring feelings about this conversation. I don't often talk about myself on this podcast or my identity, but I'm mixed race, like my Black descendants, and my British descendants, and other identities, all form into who I am. And I'm light skinned, and I found a lot of inspiration reading about Ballet Black. You know, we're in Canada and we don't have a company such as Ballet Black here. And you have almost 25 years

of history. I'm curious, like, I deeply understand urgency, but how have the conversations internally for the company evolved over the company's rich history?

CASSA PANCHO: I think at the beginning of Ballet Black's life, the organization, if you could even call it that back then because we were only one day a week, was me and the dancers. So there were some lines as to what I would discuss with the dancers because of their role, you know, they weren't management, they weren't concerned with having to raise the funds or anything like that. So while they knew why the company existed, I would say there was almost no conversation about anything other than the work for them at hand. And then as the company grew, from then to now, with a board of very diverse people, predominantly Black people and British, I'm able to have really difficult in-depth discussions about race and what it means to be Black, or mixed, or not look Black, in this country, in ballet, in a way that makes me feel understood. And I think I wouldn't be able to have that sort of conversation if I had an entirely Caucasian board. And also in the beginnings of Ballet Black, I did look to other people outside of our company for advice. But the only people in ballet at that time available to me were Caucasian. So while I could have loads of discussion about ballet, or the quality of ballet, the type of choreographer, where we should go, you know, all the ballet side of things, there was never anyone to talk to about the Blackness of it all, and why it was important. And then for me personally, there was no one to talk to about, like you, being mixed race but not really being obviously mixed. So that's something that has really developed.

ARIA EVANS: Were there artists that you brought together early on where you were able to have those conversations amongst dancers? I'm really curious at that moment 23 years ago, when you started to invite people into this company, that you were building the funding for, and putting the board together for.

CASSA PANCHO: The thing about being in a company where everyone is diverse and special, in a good way, is that because of that set up, you don't need to talk about what you are because we are all that or something like that or something adjacent to that. So I think people have always had this idea that we have these kind of militant Black

power chats every day about things, and we're just talking about how to get that pirouette done, and how to get into that lift, because all those barriers are removed. Because we're not saying, 'Why have you got your hair in braids?' or 'Can you wear these pink tights?' or 'Can you do this role that would probably really upset your ancestors?'. We're not doing anything like that and we never have, so we don't need to have those conversations. We do occasionally because of external forces that are usually unpleasant. I can't remember the time that something great happened that made us talk about race. It's normally always coming from a bad place, and that could be, you know, racist trolls on social media having something to say to us or a reviewer who, you know, talks about how we're great for a heritage group, whatever the hell that means. And those things, you know, we do discuss. But we don't spend much time on it when we have lovely comments, like an email from a parent, that says 'My daughter saw a ballerina with an afro for the first time, she couldn't believe it'. We talk about those, but again, we don't sit around saying 'How great, that we are doing this'. It's just, you know, we're busy. We got a lot of stuff to do.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah. It's beautiful to hear how those affinity spaces bring people together. And you just get to be yourself. You get to be authentic. It doesn't have to be about an identifier that you all hold.

CASSA PANCHO: Exactly.

ARIA EVANS: I want more of those spaces. [Laughs]. It's just beautiful that you're doing that work.

CASSA PANCHO: Thank you.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that struck me when we were first talking in our pre-interview was this conversation about microaggressions. And you've talked about trolls.

CASSA PANCHO: The last interaction we had with a really bad racist, there was someone threatening to burn down the theatre that we were at. Well, what I tried to draw the dance world's attention to is that, in addition to having to be great at ballet, pointe work, physical fitness, remembering choreography, learning things that you maybe do or

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do not like, we also have this other element that no other UK ballet company will ever have to deal with, and that is racist threats and microaggressions, as you just said, and all these other small things that you just are not aware of if you are Caucasian and working in a predominantly Caucasian space. And it's not that that means that no one cares, or they wouldn't try and stop it if they could, but it's just they have zero awareness of it. And when I tell people someone said they were going to come and burn down the building, they are absolutely shocked. But it's unfortunately normal for many of us who are ethnic. But I do sometimes gather it together with little screenshots and post it and say, 'Hey, rest of the dance world, when you keep telling us diversity is great because there's a few dancers in all the companies that are of color, and when you tell us there's no racism, let me just show you the kinds of messages that we receive'. And, you know, it's also a question because the last time I did a big haul, nearly every major dance account and some theatres said 'We stand with Ballet Black in the face of this racism'. But I don't really know, what does that mean? And it's not to disparage those that have said that, but I don't know, that doesn't stop us getting those comments. We didn't stop those people buying tickets to those theatres or those other dance companies, so that's a whole other podcast. Maybe we can come back for part two.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs].

CASSA PANCHO: What does it mean to say 'There's no room for racism'? Like there's so much room for racism. There's so much room. It's taking up a lot of room. So I think that when people say there is no room for racism in here, it's like, well, there is. It's just that you don't like it, and we don't like it.

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious. I know that the company has revisited its values over many years of existing. Where do you sit now with your company values?

CASSA PANCHO: I think, you know, the murder of George Floyd really helped put some things in sharp relief for me personally. Until then, although we were fairly outspoken for a British ballet company about inclusion and things like that, it was very difficult to directly

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challenge a choreographer or an individual or an organization and say, 'What you're asking of us is not right, and this is why', for fear of them thinking we're saying you're racist.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

CASSA PANCHO: Which you're generally not, you know, unless you get an outright racial slur. What we're generally saying is that what you're doing is coming from a place of no knowledge or little knowledge, and you're asking us to, you know, ask a Chinese dancer to do the Chinese dancing Nutcracker, and it's full of Chinese stereotypes, for example. And that's not an anti-Chinese sentiment on the behalf of the choreographer, probably, it's an inherited legacy of something that someone else a long time ago created and has become sort of sacrosanct in the world of ballet. So those people upholding it are not evil. And we're not saying 'you're a racist'. We're saying, 'Hey, that's not okay. And this is why'. But that really means that the person you're saying it to has to be open to listen and not be defensive. And that is the natural reaction if you're accused or you believe you're being accused of one of those big things: racism, sexism, homophobia, that kind of thing. Those can make you very defensive. So that horrific murder of George Floyd allowed me to jump from the 'I won't say anything because I don't know how to say it without upsetting her or upsetting him', and it really helped me realize I don't need to deal with the fragility of people that are perhaps walking in unknowing ignorance about something.

ARIA EVANS: Say it louder. [Laughs].

CASSA PANCHO: [Laughs]. So I can say it directly. And also where I still felt I couldn't say it, I had more Caucasian allies who could go and say it for me from a Caucasian perspective, the kind of 'white whisperer' and like, go in and say something. And it would be completely non-threatening because it was coming from someone who was the same. You know what I mean? So in that way, I think we are clearer about our values and what is important to us. But essentially we haven't really changed because we were always for this, we're just a little bit more vocal now.

ARIA EVANS: There's something really interesting about the example you gave of

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The Nutcracker and, you know, in maybe someone's desire to celebrate someone's culture, they're like, 'We're going to give you this role'. But as you said, there's so many stereotypes embedded into these canons of ballets that have existed across times where, you know, our social awareness was very different. I'm curious, has Ballet Black ever done a classic reimagining or are you focused more on new work?

CASSA PANCHO: Yeah, I mean, we are neighbors with the Royal Ballet and English National Ballet, first of all. You know, we are 20 minutes away from either of them, and they really know how to do a big classic ballet right. So we do not need to be trying to either restage or reinterpret, because most big classic companies, you know, are also reimagining all those old classics over and over. I mean, we've got billions of Swan lakes and Giselles and things, and that's cool. That works for them. But right from the beginning of Ballet Black I knew, even though I knew very little at that point, that what we didn't want to do was try and reimagine anything that has been done to the highest possible level by the Royal Ballet and English National Ballet. It's just London did not need that on its stages. So, no. We have things that we consider a Ballet Black classic piece, but we don't have classic works or reimaginings of those classic works.

ARIA EVANS: I find legacy fascinating, and I know it's something that when you're in it, it's hard to reflect sometimes. But now that you're almost at 25 years of history, what kinds of change have you witnessed in the ballet industry?

CASSA PANCHO: Oof. I mean, there's been a lot of change. You know, sometimes I'm more cynical and I think there's been very little change. But there has been.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. You can be cynical.

CASSA PANCHO: There has been change. I think if I first speak narrowly about Ballet Black, for a long time I would talk about role models and leaders in the dance world changing. And then 1 or 2 years ago, several of my dancers all, I say in quotes, 'aged out of dance', in classical ballet every day. Not aged out of, you know, life. They're only like 35 or something really young like that. But, you know, in terms of hips

and knees and ankles still being what they were, not so much. And so several of them left and are now doing massive leadership roles. We have a dancer who's a teacher at the Royal Ballet School. Like, what? That's incredible. So she's the first year tutor, her name is Sarah Kundi. So when you arrive at the Royal Ballet Upper School, which is, I imagine, very daunting for a student. The first person that you're going to have interaction with is this very wonderful dancer. Very warm, beautiful human being, and she is of Indian heritage. So there's also immediately visible diversity in the faculty. And that is something that 20 years ago would have thought was impossible to conceive at the Royal Ballet School. Another dancer who left, Cira Robinson, who I made these shoes and tights with, is now running the Yorkshire Ballet Seminars, which is a massive school in the UK. And it's being run by a black woman for the first time ever in its history. Mthuthuzeli November, someone who started as an apprentice dancer and went through the ranks is now an award winning choreographer. I mean, I don't even know what country he's in right now. He's making so many ballets. But he's made something for the Royal Ballet, Northern Ballet, Ballet Zurich, us, you know, and I'm sure there are many, many more commissions I can't even remember. So that was one big jump that happened in the last couple of years where suddenly several people left and they went into these different but visible roles. And that is exactly what I said Ballet Black should be doing 20 odd years ago. It's just that nobody was old enough, or nobody knew enough, to go out and do any of those things until they'd had their proper career. And hopefully we've nurtured that along the way. And they've all been able to go out and do amazing things. I think another change, of course, as I mentioned just now, is the shoes and tights that Cira and I worked with Freed of London to make the two shades of brown pointe shoes, which then became soft leather shoes and tights as well. So in this country we were a little bit behind the U.S. who did, I think Gaynor Mindens did it first with their point shoe range, and then I know Bloch do it now. But you know, to have a British brand do that is something I hope we can point to and say that's a tangible thing that we achieved to make a change. And while I really hate when people today in 2024 say, 'The great thing is we're starting to have these important conversations', I think we, Ballet Black, were having these conversations 20 years ago with whoever we were able to engage

with, you know, who would listen to us. And so, Ballet Black has been the little irritant on the behind of the ballet world in the UK because as long as we exist, people have to ask, why does Ballet Black need to exist in Britain?

ARIA EVANS: I want to circle back to talking about the Freed shoes and tights that you were able to have created in different skin tones. Some people listening might be like, 'Oh, like, what do you mean?'. [Laughs]. But like, what is the process to make them?

CASSA PANCHO: It took a long time because for so long Freed have an, I think it's an Italian satin brand, which is beautiful. It's pink, it's durable. It's everything that is required in a pointe shoe worn by ballerinas all over the world. So to say, 'Okay, let's just make that in a couple of shades of brown' is one thing, but to find a durable satin in a realistic human skin tone was very difficult. Plus, Black people come in many shades, from your color all the way up to the very darkest, hue. And so it was also tricky to land on a color that would sort of generally be all right for everyone, which of course, we haven't really perfected that. But it made sense that because Cira was the sort of kickstarter of the brown shoe, because she just got fed up with pancaking her pink shoes, and asked them to make her a custom shoe. And then we said, actually, instead of making just Cira some, why don't we see if we can make a brown shoe for anyone that wants a brown shoe? We started with Cira's very beautiful skin color, which is, you know, a lovely dark brown. But to find something in the right color for Cira took quite a bit of time. We found some lovely things, but they just could not hold up under a couple of days of wearing and they would fray and fall apart. We wanted to make sure that the entire shoe was brown. Not just the satin, but, you know, the drawstring, the canvas bit that the drawstring sits in, the ribbons, the mesh, anything that you might need to attach to your shoe also had to be the matching color, because the second you have to pancake even a little bit of elastic, for me, it's not worth it anymore. So there was a bit of back and forth about how we would achieve all of that, but we did. And then we found a midrange kind of bronzy color, which, I think you would look very good in. And that was to sort of service those mixed, lighter skin, mixed race Asian dancers. And it's one shade, that, and one darker shade. But you know, it's a start.

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ARIA EVANS: And you've used the term pancaking and I know what that means, but for a listener, who's like, 'What? What's that? It sounds delicious' [laughs].

CASSA PANCHO: It sounds delicious. And I don't even know why we say pancake instead of painting, but it's where you take something like makeup foundation that's your skin color and then you paint it onto a pink shoe so that it matches your skin color. So when you're wearing the point shoe, from the tip of your toe in the shoe, to your nose, you are one color. Whatever your line is, you are matching. So you have one continuous line which makes your legs look longer and makes your line look nicer. In ballet, we are obsessed with line. We want it to look long and straight and one color, and to have a dark brown leg in a bright pink shoe, just really cuts off the leg and the foot, and it doesn't look great.

ARIA EVANS: Submissions are now open for The Dance Current's Fall 2024 print issue. This is an open pitch call. We are a genre-inclusive magazine and we want to hear from dancers, movers, educators, audience members, and writers of all backgrounds. What are you thinking about? What are you engaging in? What should we highlight? Send us your ideas for features, photo essays, artist profiles, personal columns, dance criticism and more, to submissions at [thedancecurrent.com](http://thedancecurrent.com). Please submit by August 26th. And don't forget to check out our summer issue on newsstands next week.

One of the things that I loved from our pre-interview was the quote that I have of you saying 'You can still get rotation in your hips with breasts and a big butt'. And I was like, it's so refreshing to hear someone say that, because there's such a misconception about what bodies can do, and what it means to be able to have a line, to express ourselves in a very quintessential ballet aesthetic. And when I think about representation, I think about cultural diversity, of course, but I also think about the diversity of the bodies that are on stage. Do you see possibilities of transformation in this area, in the ballet industry as well?

CASSA PANCHO: You know, I'm seeing change in the UK, definitely. I've seen

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bosoms appearing. And listen, we like a nice round butt too. But, it was always funny to me that if you had big boobs, you couldn't do ballet. Like what? What? What? What!? Maybe the butt thing you might say 'That's getting in the way of something'. But the boobs? I've really never understood that. I think we are seeing a greater body diversity in British ballet. Of course, we've got a long legacy of, you know, eating disorders and this 'ideal' very slim physique, which is the sort of norm, I suppose. When you ask someone to picture a ballerina, you probably picture a very, very slim woman in a tutu on her tippy toes, spinning around with a tiara. And that's okay.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. The tiara, I love that version.

CASSA PANCHO: It's fine. But it's just not the only way. And for me, it's just, is your body healthy? So if you're very very slim naturally, because you eat and that's just the size you are, then great, you know. Go ahead. But if you have, you know, a more muscular body, or a curvaceous body, then that is good too as long as you are healthy. You know, I'm not saying to be overweight in ballet and be, you know, the other end of the spectrum, unhealthy. But it's always been, to me, madness. And not, I don't think, because I'm mixed race, but it's always been madness to me that everyone would have to be exactly the same.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, yeah. I never understood the sort of like, corps de ballet either.

CASSA PANCHO: No. One challenge for Ballet Black is because we've got a dancer from four foot 11, and then all the heights up to about six foot. So if you want everyone to hit an arabesque at the same time, it's going to be difficult to work that out because you've got crazy long limbs and then little limbs. And so it is useful for corps de ballet that they're all the same height and size if you want everyone moving the same way. Then that is a benefit. But you know, we can learn how to all arabesque together, at different heights and some boobs thrown in there and we'll all be okay.

ARIA EVANS: What do you think the attachment is in the ballet industry to this, sort of like, cookie cutter human?

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CASSA PANCHO: I think it's virginal purity and, you know, women needing rescuing and this sort of female on a pedestal. Not a good pedestal. Kind of a 'She needs to be up there for her own protection' pedestal. And it's so prevalent in our traditional ballet stories. You know, I think everyone needs rescuing. Every now and then the girl might come good and do the rescuing herself, but generally some strapping, virile man will come, and hopefully she's a virgin so that it's all cool. And I think it all just goes back somewhere icky and, it was fine for back then, but you know, it's not cool now. So, you know, tell those stories if you want. But let's also try and tell some other stories, because so many arts organizations are always talking about, 'We want a modern audience, we want a younger audience. We need to make sure we're planning for our future and having new, younger people coming in and doing theatre or ballet, but you can't do that with the same product that you have always used, in my opinion.

ARIA EVANS: It also makes me think about the question that I often have, which is, how could this have been different if it was written, if it was directed, if it was choreographed by a woman? And having more female voices in positions of power, I think, also challenges those narratives that I just want to say good riddance to. [Laughs].

CASSA PANCHO: You know, often with ballet, I don't know about Canada and the U.S., but in the UK, often you'll get into a school at age 11 and then you'll stay there till 16, 17. So you've been in the same mindset, in the same kind of bubble. Then you might graduate into the company that the school feeds into, if you're lucky. You're considered to be lucky if you can do that. Then you might stay there for your entire career, and you've spent maybe 35 years in one way of thinking. So you could have a million female choreographers come out of that and still be telling the same story. So I think it's a diversity of experience as well as gender or sex.

ARIA EVANS: As somebody who's mixed race, I often find that I am the bridge between things. I think by understanding one part of dominant culture and having an understanding of what it means to be a person of color in the world, I sort of feel like that's where my place, like, meets itself. And I don't want to speak for you, but I'm curious, as a final thought, where do you feel like your identity sits inside of Ballet Black?

CASSA PANCHO: I think my biggest struggle still is my racial identity. Because before George Floyd- everything for me in Ballet Black is pre and post George Floyd, so pre, I think maybe a little bit like what you're saying. I was a non-threatening face, physical and literal face, asking for room in the ballet world. And it was less unnerving, I believe, for some people to say, 'Okay, let's talk about whatever' to me. Post George Floyd, I feel that now everybody wants to show they've got Black representation. I don't now meet the requirements of visible representation so that has always left me. I knew in the beginning I was getting a pass to things. Using it for good, but still getting the pass that you know, a black woman may not have had access to then. And now I think, 'Oh, God, you know, this person is going to be disappointed when they see me pop up on their podcast' or whatever, because they're expecting me to look more obviously mixed race or Trinidadian. So that's I think the line that many mixed people just have to walk. And it's probably not ever going to be as bad as it is for an unambiguously black person who cannot pretend they're not black in a moment of danger. You know? Whereas you and I could pretend we're almost anything, couldn't we, if we had to, to save our own life or something really extreme. So I'm mindful of not complaining about it, but it is something that I think about every single day. Except really when I'm with the dancers or with the kids at our school. But when I'm dealing with people that aren't part of Ballet Black, I've had someone from a theatre sitting down the road from me who looked to see me when someone said, 'That is the director' she went, 'Oh, she's just a white girl'. You know, and that, in her mind, lessened the impact of having Ballet Black at her venue. And really, I have so many opinions on things like Colourism, and I know what it is, and I see it happening, and it's wrong and I want to call it out. But sometimes I feel, as I am not the color of the person who's really suffering from the colourism, that maybe I shouldn't speak on these topics. I mean, I do, but maybe I should be more careful about speaking about these topics in a way that seems like I'm doing it without the permission, maybe, of a Black woman, for example. So I try to remember that I'm speaking on behalf of people that I represent who work for me or with me, or people that historically I've seen be shut out because of things like the shade of their skin.

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ARIA EVANS: My last question is if you are up to share, what has been a transformational moment for you in your time as an Artistic Director? It can be specific to Ballet Black, but it can also just be generally.

CASSA PANCHO: Aging has been really good for me being a director. When I was 35, I was still very, very, very worried about what other people thought. And I don't know if that is something that you deal with, but as I have aged, it has been good. I still worry about what some people think, but it's been really good to let a lot of that go. And so that has been a gradual, transformational thing for me. Unfortunately, as you get older, my eyesight's terrible. My knees are terrible. So there are things that I wish I had known when I was in my 20s and 30s, while I was still really able to do things. You know, youth is wasted on the young. Now I really start to understand that phrase. Yeah, but I think, as I mentioned earlier, those 3 or 4 people leaving Ballet Black and going out and taking those roles has felt transformational, because I always used to talk about Ballet Black as something that hopefully would create people like that. And then the transformation happened. And now I can say it has created people like that. And you can 'Look, there's that one and there's that one and there's that one'. So that, you know, for the longest time I talked in hypotheticals like, you know, if these dancers leave Ballet Black and they go and become choreographers or leaders, then that will start to change the dance industry. And now it's actually happening. And so that is a transformational moment for me. But it's not a moment. It's a kind of wide time period. So it's not like one specific thing is a transformational moment for me. It's a gradual happening.

ARIA EVANS: To hear you talk about the way you've sort of shaped representation offstage by working on stage, there's something really metaphorically delightful about that. Thank you for sharing. You can follow Cassa and Ballet Black at [balletblack.co.uk](http://balletblack.co.uk) or on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter at Ballet Black. And that's our show. The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada/ fait au canada, a biennial contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists with unique artistic visions from all cultural backgrounds. The 'D' Word airs annually, as well as our dance film screening series available at [dancemadeincanada.ca](http://dancemadeincanada.ca). The 'D' Word is produced by

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