

IM - Regina Perry-Carr.3gp

Jenai Cutcher [00:00:04] Okay, welcome, Regina! How are you?

Regina Perry-Carr [00:00:08] I'm well, how are you?

Jenai Cutcher [00:00:10] I'm really, really good. We got a false start there so I'm just going to repeat what I said when we were off camera, [laughs] that you are the somewhat new artistic director of Muntu Ensemble?

Regina Perry-Carr [00:00:23] Yes, so I am just one year into the position. I took the position January 20th of 2020.

Jenai Cutcher [00:00:32] Happy anniversary!

Regina Perry-Carr [00:00:34] Thank you!

Jenai Cutcher [00:00:34] Plus eleven days. [laughs]

Regina Perry-Carr [00:00:36] Yeah, Muntu Dance Theater of Chicago, was just Muntu Dance Theater, so we just cut it.

Jenai Cutcher [00:00:40] And Muntu is one of the oldest companies in Chicago presenting one of the oldest forms in human history, so there's a lot of history that we can dive into there. Plus, you're not new to the company, even though you're new to the role. So can you tell me a little bit about what that was like coming up in the company and how that's informing you as you lead now?

Regina Perry-Carr [00:01:05] Coming up in Muntu Dance Theater was always about having a representation that I know that a lot of young women of color may not have had, especially in dance. So I always felt very proud, it was always very magical to me to be able to be around such magnificent artistry. Muntu has such a rich culture and a rich history. We're 49 years old this year and we're actually the second oldest still-operating African dance company in the nation.

Jenai Cutcher [00:01:41] Wow, I didn't know that!

Regina Perry-Carr [00:01:43] We're the second oldest, yes, it's one other dance company, Ko-Thi Dance Company, is like, two years older than us or something like that. So it's pretty cool. [laughter]

Jenai Cutcher [00:01:53] Oh, my gosh, yeah, absolutely, absolutely! And so can we talk a little bit, you know, I've been asking this periodically throughout the day and I'd like to know more, too, about your own history and your own training, your teachers and what you learned from them. And again, kind of starting with your beginnings in Muntu, leading up to assuming leadership.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:02:19] So, I would say that my dance career in general would be of pushing limits and boundaries, so I began training in Cecchetti technique and ballet, and even though I loved it, so graceful, so it's so masterful, I knew physically that I don't fit in that box like, I was like I got boobs, butt came fairly early [laughter] just by DNA genetics. So I also-- I started taking African dance, legitimately taking classes with my mother at

three years old. So a lot of people say, "Oh, I started dancing at three." No, I was actually in class, had my little lapel on. There's footage of me at five years old doing Agbadza from Ghana, like we got the footage. So it was always having a love for the art form, but aesthetically knowing that this might not be something that I will get to pursue professionally because I did not fit into "standards." So even though I always was so dedicated to the art, you know, everyone in your mind is like, "Regina, you have to be careful because, you know, you're you and you look like you. So you have to, you know, be careful because this is not a job for you. This is just a hobby. So you're going to want to get a job at some point." And I'm hard-headed and I like to take the- [laughter] the hard route, so right after graduating from high school, so I entered into the ranks-- let me let me be fair, because if people see this and they're like, "You didn't say my name," I started taking more focused, African dance focus with Najwa Dance Corps and Andrea Vinson, so she was one of my first African dance instructors. And then Mama Amaniyea showed interest. Amaniyea Payne, who was the artistic director for the course of my time in the company, she showed interest. I ended up auditioning at a fairly young age, I was like 14 years old. My mom was already in there, training component. And I matriculated pretty quickly through the ranks, like I started out no training, became an apprentice, then, you know, at 17, I had the ability-- I was turning 18, I had the ability to tour. And I'm like, look, this is what people have told me I can't do. Let me do it because this is awesome, you know? So I did take a break to start a family. And I knew it would be even harder to rejoin because, even at the size I was, I was considered like, a plus-sized person, so now after having three babies, breastfeeding, this going to be something, [laughter] you know what I mean? So let's just try it. So I dived right back in and I actually created my own dance organization, Nunufatima Dance Company, and from there it just opened doors. I've always just loved the arts so much, so it's always just about advocating for women of color. Advocating the traditions, and keeping the traditions going. So it was just a matter of when they reached back out to me and offered me the position, after some thinking and like, "Oh boy, like, are you serious?" Because it's a full circle moment for me. I felt like I had no other choice but to step back in and re-gift to other artists what was gifted to me, like I feel like it's a responsibility.

Jenai Cutcher [00:06:17] That's a great way to put it, yeah. And Muntu, it seems, you talked about advocating, advocacy and activism. It seems like that was, you know, even at the core of Muntu, even at its inception 49 years ago.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:06:32] Right, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [00:06:32] And thinking about this moment that we're in now, a social justice reckoning and activism, how does Muntu figure into that at this moment? And I guess, what's changed and what's not even?

Regina Perry-Carr [00:06:47] Well, what hasn't changed is the representation. And during this time where it's new for people because of the time we're in and what people have been witnessing, but this is not a new journey for artists of color. And Black artists in general, it's not anything new, you know. But what I get from a lot of my artists is that they're just so happy to be a part of an organization where the representation is present. I mean, that's really just the overall ... it's a sense of pride that they get to come and do what we're still fighting to be considered authentic, you know, because we have a lot to push back against. I've trained all my life in African dance and I still only know this much. And so we're in a society now where a lot of people are still introduced to what they feel is traditional African dance through like "Black Panther" and like "Coming to America," which is great, I'm so happy that that representation is there. But that's just the tip of the iceberg

as far as representation. Muntu prides itself on the interpretation of authentic African dance and, you know, keeping that culture, you know, and passing it along, you know, through generations.

Jenai Cutcher [00:08:15] Yeah, yeah, and the other day you said something that stuck with me, that African history is sacred but elusive, and talking about passing it on, one of the things I love about watching Muntu is that it's multigenerational and it's rare that we get to see multi-generations on stage at once. But I imagine too that that is a big part of maintaining this history, that the younger dancers have that access to the authenticity. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Regina Perry-Carr [00:08:48] So without sounding really boring and knowing that we only have a limited amount of time, I have to talk really fast, a lot of African-American history in the United States, unfortunately, begins at the landing of chattel slavery, not indentured servitude, but the slavery that we endured here in America. And a bulk of what Muntu does starts before that. So when you're talking about like the Malian Empire and Mansa Musa or King Sundiata, when you're passing down the lineage, that's oral history that's coming from before anyone went and picked people up and brought them here. So it's absolutely very important that people understand that you did not begin as a slave. You began as a very free person who was free to create art, who was free to share. And we have to figure out- because there are some things that we as a people here in America have yet to still kind of work in talking, you know, and get comfortable with one another. It's very different to understand your strength and your value when you're being taught prior to slavery. So, of course, we deal in things and we have done dances of slavery because those are all things that are a part of the culture and they're very important, you know, what the ancestors endured is the most important, but it's a different feel when they're getting value about who you are really. And through the art, it's very, very empowering, it's very empowering. So I'm very happy that those are the conversations that we're in a lot of the time, is teaching the history prior to slavery, which is very important.

Jenai Cutcher [00:10:50] Right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:10:52] Right.

Jenai Cutcher [00:10:53] Regina, I'm so glad that Chicago has Muntu and Muntu has you. And I really look forward to seeing what's next as we go on.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:11:03] We got some stuff coming so keep an eye out. And hopefully we get to do this a little longer without so much constraint! [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [00:11:09] Absolutely, yup, this is just the tip of the iceberg, we're scratching the surface. But, yes, to be continued, for sure.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:11:15] Yes. Well, thank you for having me! Thank you so very much.

Jenai Cutcher [00:11:18] Thank you for sharing your time with us.

Regina Perry-Carr [00:11:20] Yeah, you're very welcome.