

EVERYBODY DANCE

Internationally renowned choreographer Assou Ayiga has a mission to bring people together through dance



Chic's exhortation to give our bodies over to the dance floor certainly struck a chord with British youth in 1977 and the act of dancing as a cultural expression of ourselves still retains its magnetic pull in 2009: whether it's club spaces, festival fields or rented community halls, the sense of release that dance potentially offers reminds us of the pleasures of embodied experience.

Assou Ayiga, choreographer and Artistic Director of Ayigafrik Dance, knows this more than most. A Togolese migrant to Britain in the 1990s, Assou felt the urge to dance from an early age. Inspired in his adolescence by the pioneering performances of the African-American choreographer and radical, Alvin Ailey, Assou trained in various dance styles, from jazz and classical to contemporary. Ailey's inspirational challenges to the conventions of dance cultures, together with his promotion of civil rights and collegiate approach to creativity – he worked with artists as diverse as Maya Angelou, Truman Capote and Harry Belafonte – struck a chord with the young Assou who has taken up his mentor's mantle and retains a progressive view of dance as a cultural form that allows individuals to connect. In this sense the collective experi-

ence is all.

Relocating from London to Southend shortly after his arrival in the UK in order to feel a sense of engagement with his environment (London being far too anonymous) Assou performed at the recent Village Green event in Chalkwell Park. Over the years he's accepted invitations to perform internationally at prestigious events in, among other locations, South Korea, his native Togo and, in an act of resentment, in the capital of its former coloniser, France.

Assou's creative mission is to selflessly promote the benefits of dance to the wider community and to this end he welcomes newcomers and experienced dancers alike to his weekly dance



classes. Judgment is withheld; participation is all. He can be located on most Saturdays at the Storehouse Community Centre in Coleman Street, Southend where he offers African dance classes. You'd be a fool not to go. Now, everybody dance...

By Andrew Branch

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