

Do you speak dance? Netflix is trying to

A dancer-host dives into dance culture and performance around the world and takes you with her to meet a series of passionate, creative, and politically active dancers

by Sonja Thrasher

The “We Speak Dance”¹ series (2018), available on Netflix, is an inspiring production that makes the intersection of dance and culture readily available in five entertaining 22-minute episodes. Viewers get an inside look at different kinds of dance through meeting a series of individuals who often reflect culture but also create art and social dance in five different locations where empowering roots and global borrowing is often in evidence.

This documentary series is highly valuable to students, teachers, and fans of dance as it provides a first-hand look into the concept of both borrowing and preserving culture. Not only does this enrich your knowledge of dance styles and practices around the world, it also familiarizes you with the unique traditions, values, and practices of specific individuals who are passionate about dance. Host Vandana Hart describes the documentary series as “using dance as an international language to connect people across cultures.” Hart attended the Alvin Ailey School, holds a degree in International Affairs from NYU, and a masters in Economics from the London School of Economics. She advises the United Nations on women’s rights and youth empowerment and has found that “dance is the most powerful way to unite people, transform lives, and act as a weapon for social change.”² Hart incorporates this background into her host role, using her dance training to participate in different dance styles, while using her background in advocacy to explore dance from a political lens.

In one episode focusing on modern-day Lagos, Hart meets Yeni and Femi Kuti, the daughter and son of Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti. The viewer’s introduction to this Afrobeat icon provides some cultural context for one of the contributors of what is called street dance around the world. In dance scholar Jane Desmond’s essay, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural studies,” I found an example of how useful historical information about a dance form can be. Desmond asserts that most people have some knowledge of how the tango looks and could probably even attempt it purely based on their exposure to it on television. But few people would give much thought to its roots and political complexity.³ I thought of a connection between social dance here and in Africa, deciding that dancers today need this historical knowledge to pay homage to those who came before them. This Lagos episode explaining Afrobeat culture does an effective job of showing the people and communities who helped shape dance into what we know today.

The humanity of dance is showcased as Episode 3 transports the viewer to Lebanon. In Beirut, dance is explored in its many different forms, from a wedding, to a refugee camp, to a nightclub.

¹ Hart, Vandana, et al. *We Speak Dance*. *We Speak Dance*, Netflix, Jan. 2018.

² <https://www.vandanahart.com/about-1>

³ Desmond, Jane C. “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 26, 1993, pp. 33–63. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1354455.

In the refugee portion of the episode, Hart's decision to teach a dance class to children in a Palestinian refugee camp provides a model for viewers. Dance majors can see the impact that dance has to heal and inspire people with few resources. Sabine C Koch, Ph.D, writes about an integrated dance and therapy approach specifically for refugees: "Dance/movement therapy allows for the treatment of complex psychological trauma (such as war experiences) and contributes to the healing process directly on a body level."⁴ This episode successfully communicates the ability that dancers and dance teachers have to make a positive impact on a community, specifically young people. Sharing dance in a setting such as a refugee camp can lead to healing. Although the children do not get dance classes regularly, and despite the language barrier from English to Arabic, dance is once again proven a universal way to communicate.

In Episode 5, a colorful variety of global dance forms are showcased in Paris, where ballet, burlesque, hip hop battles, and vogue balls are each explored in kind. All of these different styles come together to make up the dance culture of this iconic city. Jerome "Goku" Fidelin is featured with a style that was developed uniquely in Paris. "Electro," he says, combines "house, Moroccan, Chaabi, disco, hip-hop, and freehand glow sticking."⁵ This dance is an example of the constant emergence of new styles and subcategories of dance. This episode reminds the viewer that each day dancers around the world are innovating something entirely new from a complex blend of styles already in existence. By maintaining awareness of these new styles you can greatly expand your repertoire as well as heighten your knowledge of the global dance world.

Dance majors would greatly benefit from watching "We Speak Dance" as it offers a look into the globalization of the dance world that connects us all. Valuable lessons are presented first-hand, illustrating the importance of knowing the origins of different styles of dance, the healing power of dance in oppressed communities, and the emergence of new styles. What this series articulates about the world is that dance connects us all, allowing us to understand one another without words. It generates a discussion about tradition, culture, innovation, and creativity. Hart's style of joining in as an enthusiastic outsider gives viewers a true dancer perspective. This inspires curiosity to discover other countries' dance cultures and to continue to explore what a globalized dance world means by both borrowing and preserving cultures.

"We Speak Dance" is presented by Hart Media and created/hosted by Vandana Hart. Locations explored in five episodes highlight dance in Lagos, Vietnam, Beirut, Bali, and Paris. Produced for TV exclusively, the series has been available on Netflix from January 2018, until further notice.

⁴ Koch, Sabine. "Traumatized Refugees: An Integrated Dance and Verbal Therapy Approach." *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Pergamon, 22 July 2009, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197455609000768.