

Teaching Artist Spotlight: Cachet Ivey

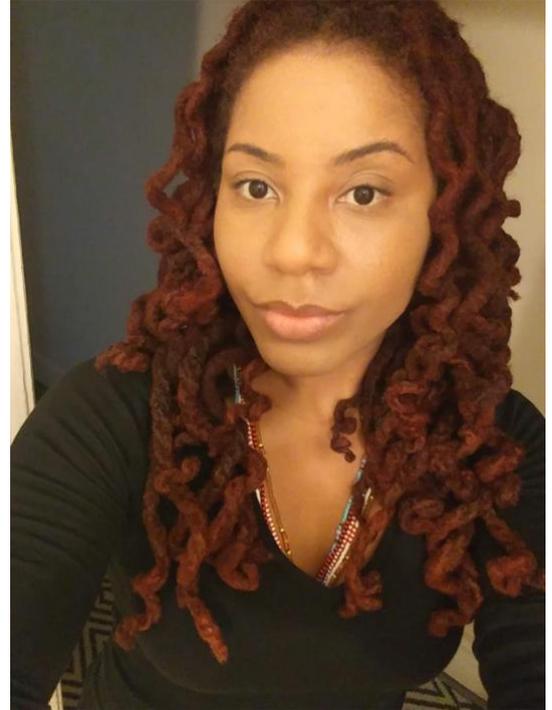
March 2021...Cachet Ivey has been a Teaching Artist with Musicopia since 2014, and is an ensemble member in the [Afro-Cuban Music and Dance](#) program that offers Musicopia assemblies, workshops, and residencies to schools and community organizations. She also teaches, and performs, dances from West Africa.

Her specialty is dance, but she often plays percussion instruments as well during her performances and programs, and, when in-person, will bring a collection of small percussion instruments with her to help her students make the connection between the movement and rhythm. “With Afro-Cuban and West African styles of dance, the instrumentation goes hand-in-hand,” says Cachet. “Even if you’re a dancer, you’re going to end up playing something.” Cachet is always impressed at how quickly her students catch on, regardless of age or demographic. “Rhythms are universal. It still amazes me that I’ve had first and second graders that are able to play somewhat complicated bell patterns. I show them once, and sometimes they can play it better than some people who have been studying forever!”

Cachet was in first and second grade herself when she began her journey into dance. Her dad enrolled her in Freedom Theatre, a well-known theatre and dance school in Philadelphia. There she studied ballet, jazz, and tap. She was also exposed early on to traditional dance by her father, a percussionist, who played West African drums and congas. “I enjoyed ballet and jazz, but what really spoke to me were the traditional dances that had live drums, especially after I saw a performance that combined the two,” Cachet said. “I told my dad that I wanted to do that too! The drums are a magnet for me.” Shortly after, she enrolled in West African and Afro Cuban dance classes at CEC (Community Education Center) and ultimately joined the youth dance company of the Ibeji Performing Arts Company.

Throughout her instruction Cachet has had some of the top instructors, practitioners, and pioneers of West African and Afro Cuban drum and dance including Dorothy Wilkie and John Wilkie, the directors of Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble. “I grew up watching them because they’ve been around for 50 years,” said Cachet. “It was always mesmerizing to me because they are two of the pioneers – still living legends in Philadelphia – who paved the way for Afro Cuban dance and drums in Philly. I owe a lot to them.”

Cachet’s teachers not only taught her the dance and the rhythms, but also the cultural context that went along with them. Cachet has carried that with her, and now incorporates that philosophy into her own teaching. “When I was a student, we had to be able to connect the dance and rhythm to the different cultures and ethnic groups, and be able to express it verbally so that it wasn’t this abstract thing,” she said. “It wasn’t enough to just say ‘I’m doing an Afro Cuban dance,’ because saying that could literally mean thousands of different things. That type of research was a huge part of my training, and now my teaching.” Cachet wants her students to be able to tell their friends and family not just the name of a dance, but why that traditional dance is done, what part of the year it is done, what happens before it is done, and the country and ethnic group from which it originates. “It’s definitely a rabbit



hole!” she says. “It’s a constant study. There is never a time when you know everything. Culture is infinite.”

One of the things that Cachet loves most about dance and drumming is the energy exchange. She describes it as two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. “I love to participate in it and I also love to watch it. Because, if you know what you’re looking at, you can see the rhythm inside people’s bodies.” There is also a kind of bouncing back and forth that she has grown to love and cherish. “A few weeks ago we did a taping of a Musicopia assembly program, and that was the first time that I had been in the same room with a cast doing anything together in months. So to actually dance to *live music* after what seems like so long and just have that exchange, I cherish those moments more now,” Cachet said. “When we get to the point to where we can get back to doing that all the time, it will be even more special because of the time now when we can’t do that.”

Cachet has had many memorable moments as a Musicopia Teaching Artist, but her favorite are those when the students perform at the end of a residency or workshop. The students go from never having learned about or performed this type of dance and drumming, to having the confidence to get on stage to perform in front of their peers and teachers. “It’s no easy feat,” she says. “No matter what style you’re doing, what instrumentation, it is not easy to get on stage and be vulnerable, and also execute and remember choreography. I always enjoy watching them come to life, especially those who might have taken a little longer to catch on. It’s always amazing to see that growth.”

In addition to memorable moments, Cachet has also seen first-hand the positive impact of her work with students. As an example, on days when Cachet is scheduled to come in, the classroom teacher will often notice a change in the students’ behavior because they know that if they want to participate, and not be told that they need to sit out, they need to focus. “That is something that I see over and over again, and I think it confirms the importance of the performing and visual arts, and how they allow children to express whatever feelings they have inside themselves.” There have also been times when Cachet has been told that there might be a student who needs some extra attention due to behavior concerns. In those situations, Cachet will often ask that student to be her assistant. The student will turn on the speaker, move a desk, and help to prepare the space. “And then after one or two classes, they’re the ones who remember the choreography and help the other students. I see the shift in behavior in those children who have some difficulty sometimes. All of these behaviors, whether seen as negative or positive in children, are all an expression of something. When they’re able to let go of that energy and express it and direct it in a different way, such as through music or dance, you can see the effects of it,” said Cachet.

The past year has forced many changes, of course, to how Cachet teaches and presents in a virtual environment. She had to learn quickly how to maintain her students’ attention virtually, which includes making sure that she has good lighting, a good webcam, and is wearing vibrant colors. She will also sometimes incorporate video of children from around the world dancing the same dance that she is teaching her students. “As artists, we say that we are creative and innovative, and this climate with the pandemic has really tested that,” she said. “That energy exchange of being in the same room is no longer present, so I cannot approach it in the same way as if I were in the same room with them. I need to be creative and think outside of the box.”

In addition to her work at Musicopia, Cachet teaches an adult dance class at CEC, performs with Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble, and, during the past year, has been taking singing lessons. “I’m not a singer,” Cachet said, “but singing is a huge part of these traditions that I’m a part of, so it’s important to me to learn the proper pronunciation and inflection.”

She is, of course, excited to get back into the classroom in-person when safe to do so. “Musicopia gets it right when it comes to the variety of different styles and genres, and spreads those things out across a wide variety of students,” she said. “Musicopia facilitates the work in a way that makes it all-inclusive.”

By Talia Yellin Fisher