

PARALLEL

Dancers and actors have so much in common – but not all. **Diep Tran** and Noma Dumezweni

A week before dancer/actor Ariana DeBose found out she was nominated for a Tony award for playing the title role in *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical* on Broadway in 2018, she twisted her ankle during a performance. And in a kind of freak coincidence, her understudy threw out her back. DeBose admits she had crafted her role to be dance heavy because ‘I didn’t want them to be able to replace me.’

So ‘[choreographer Sergio Trujillo] and I went through and figured out how I could do the show with a cane,’ she exclaims proudly. ‘I did the show with a cane. Pimp daddy disco Donna working hard for her money.’ As her fellow actor Noma Dumezweni remarks, ‘This is the business of show! Love it.’

DeBose knows quite a bit about show business. She’d been dancing since she was three and gained national notoriety on the tv competition *So You Think You Can Dance*. She has since been in the original cast of *Hamilton* on Broadway (playing the bullet that sealed Alexander Hamilton’s fate), and just finished filming the Steven Spielberg-directed *West Side Story* where she plays Anita.

She didn’t win that Tony, but she did meet Dumezweni, nominated for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. More than a year later, the two sat down in Dumezweni’s apartment in New York City to talk about the differences, and similarities, between actors and dancers.

DIEP TRAN I discovered that neither of you were professionally trained in acting.

NOMA DUMEZWENI I was in an Edinburgh Festival show and I remember an older actor asking me, ‘Darling, where did you train?’ [whispers] I didn’t. ‘Darling that’s perfect, you’re learning on the job! Everyone who goes to drama school will have to start all over again.’ And over the years that’s exactly what I’ve seen.

ARIANA DEBOSE I lasted in college for maybe three months and then I split. I had already done *So You Think You Can Dance*. My teenage years were so complicated, trying to fit into my dance school. I was one of the best dancers there and I knew it: I was focused.

DUMEZWENI Did you have any particular style or was it knowing how to use your body?

DEBOSE Just to really use it. I was trained to be hyper-versatile. I had been dancing since I was three and started properly training when I was 11. By the time I was 18, I had worked with Tyce Diorio, Mandy Moore. I took ballet three times a week at North Carolina Ballet Center for seven years.

DUMEZWENI Wow. That’s why I was fascinated to talk to you, because we do traverse the same world, but I don’t traverse your dance world, and I’m fascinated by that. I’ve done shows with dancers where I realised, you guys are different. That kind of body sensitivity...

DEBOSE Dancers not only have to take care of themselves in order to facilitate a vision, but you have to fit into a puzzle. The ‘legit’ dance world (like the Alvin Ailey company) and the ballet world, in contrast with the musical theatre market, have very clear prototypes. The bodies are very specific. In musical

sit down with Ariana DeBose, star of Steven Spielberg’s new *West Side Story*.

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‘I was trained to be hyper-versatile’... Ariana DeBose at the Tony awards Photo: MediaPunch Inc/Alamy

'From the tip of my hair to my toes'... Noma Dumezweni left (in *Linda*) and right Photos: Johan Persson/Royal Court; Dario Calmese for *Dance Gazette*. Stylist: Anatolli Smith. Coat and shirt: The Row

'T ALL STARTS WITH MOVEMENT. POINT BLANK, END OF STORY'

ARIANA DEBOSE



theatre there's a heavier acting component in the ensemble gigs, so there's a little room for you to fluctuate.

DUMEZWENI They've got all different bodies! You don't have to be skinny. But you're all fit – because that's the level you have to be on, eight shows a week.

TRAN Ariana, why did you switch to musical theatre when you were a teen?

DEBOSE I was 17. Dance was no longer challenging to me. It became too easy, I worked really hard, and I was really good at it, and I'm bored! So I started taking drama classes in high school. And it was so hard, but

I loved the sense of community. I loved where I grew up dancing, but I never felt a part of the community.

DUMEZWENI That's what I love about theatre.

DEBOSE Now I'm doing *West Side Story*, I have very specific ideas, feelings, and opinions about my character. Here's the thing about dance and acting. They need different kinds of preparation, and you need different amounts of time to become familiar with the material. Dancers are incredibly quick at picking up steps and sequences, but it can take longer as an actor to prepare a scene. You have to think your way into the words. When I'm

auditioning, if I'm asked to try a new dance sequence, I can try that right away – but if I'm asked to read some pages, I always ask for the necessary time. That's true for a stage show or a film like *West Side Story*. Always strive to be quick on your feet but, when an opportunity like that comes along, you want to make sure you are properly prepared.

DUMEZWENI I did a play at the Young Vic in London, called *Feast*, a story about diaspora. We had this extraordinary Cuban choreographer, George Cespedes, one of the sexiest men you've ever seen. There were dancers in the company, but the actors had to dance too. That was the first time I met dancers in the same space. Watching them in

the room was extraordinary. In rehearsal, they got the choreography within five minutes. We actors took ages, because I was going, 'Why am I doing this?' It drove me crazy.

But later, during tech, it became more about the acting, and the amazing dancers, literally there were moments [she moves her feet restlessly]. They didn't know what to do!

DEBOSE Dancers don't know what to do. We don't do anything unless we're told to do it.

DUMEZWENI You don't improvise against it.

DEBOSE Literally, they say jump and you ask how high. I knew I was breaking away

from it when I would ask why. 'Why am I jumping though?'

DUMEZWENI That's the actor coming through.

DEBOSE There are choreographers who are hyper-specific about the movement but can't tell you why you're doing it. I don't like being locked in.

TRAN Ariana, how do you approach a character now, compared to when you started out in the ensemble?

DEBOSE It's still the same. It all starts with movement: point blank, end of story. Because body language is everything.

DUMEZWENI I've got this thing about the body. If it's not from the tip of my hair to the tip of my toes and fingers, if one finger feels off, something's not right, I still haven't got it. When I watch something, I can tell when someone's not in it, something about the way they're moving, and I don't believe their words.

DEBOSE There's a disconnect. It's really head to toes. The way I talk about dance when I'm teaching, it all starts here [touches her chest], like your torso and your heart. If it's not felt here, viscerally, no one else is going to feel it.