

Breonna Taylor in 2020 in the US, and through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Stand Up to Racism movements, many people have been emboldened to push for tangible change within their communities and industries. In the UK, 100 current and former workers of colour at London's Barbican arts centre banded together to share harrowing

We are witnessing a re-energised fight against racial inequity and

systemic racism. Since the brutal murders of George Floyd and

experiences of discrimination and racism in Barbican Stories, leading to a shake-up of staff, while a collective of theatre organisations recently launched an anti-racism rider to offer a practical toolkit for more racially equitable working conditions for touring shows and events.

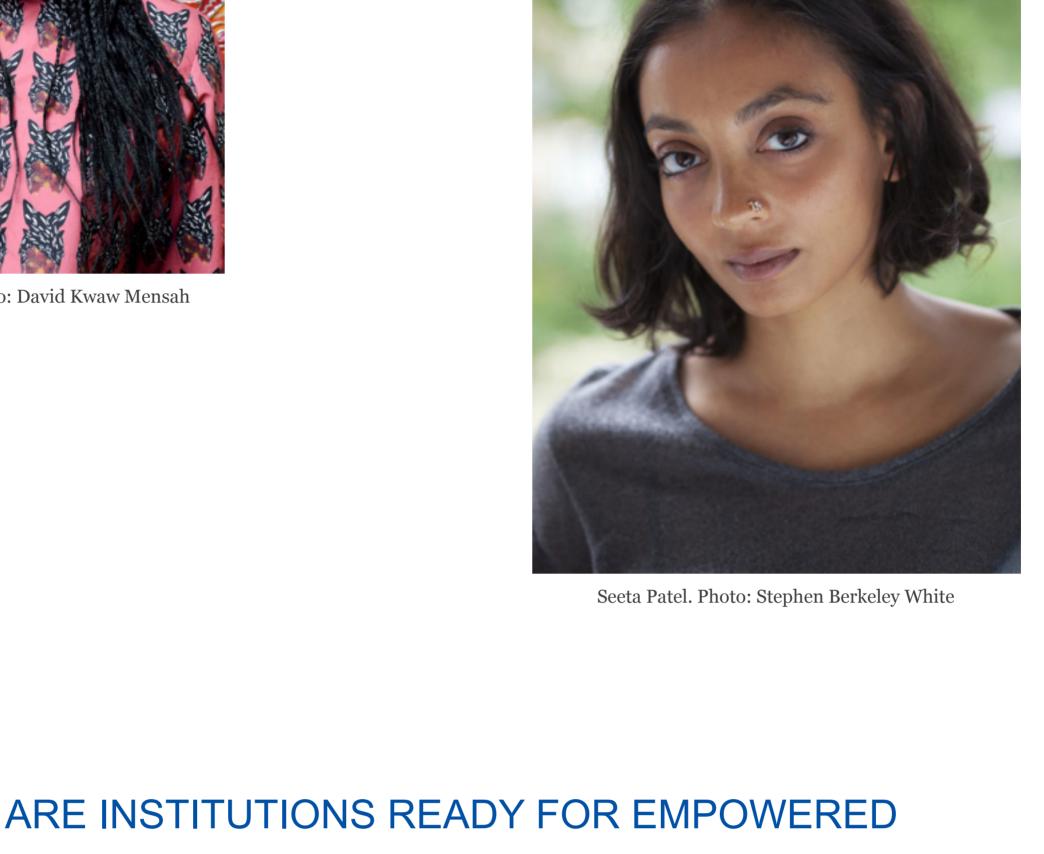


TIRED Movement (Trying to Improve Racial Equality in Dance) and training organisations including the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) came together to share racial equity practices. The usual buzzwords came up in the 'Talking Dance: Improving Racial Equity' symposium – diversity, inclusion, representation – yet the specificity of racial equity in dance teaching and how it affects young dancers sparked an interesting thread. Karina H Maynard, a consultant, educator and panellist in the

practitioners who recognise this shift in momentum. In June, the

It has been no different for dance industry leaders and

symposium, centres young voices in these conversations as 'they are the stakeholders, they are the ones who are experiencing things.' Maynard runs Continuing Professional Development programmes to improve racial representation in dance education and works with young people to strengthen their self-esteem. 'I developed an approach of supporting young people [by] giving them spaces to explore identity, race, culture, [and] having conversations that are not normally had,' she says. '[To] give them the opportunity to think about themselves as individuals and practice listening, so they get used to centring other people. I'm preparing an institution for an empowered, proud, young person.'



YOUNG DANCERS OF COLOUR?

'Part of your job, as someone who is trying to bring in more

Racial equity in dance teaching should be treated as a

safeguarding issue in Shannelle 'Tali' Fergus' opinion. 'I don't

know how often the people that are engaging teachers are in the

room to see them teach,' says the choreographer and agent for hip

hop company ZooNation. 'You've got to be in the space to see how

they are with your students. Like an interview process for a job, I

don't think it would hurt to go through something like that.'

## colour? Dance organisations still maintain a rigid teacher-student diversity, is to bring in the [people of colour] that scare you,' Patel hierarchy which, through many told experiences, stifles speaking adds. 'Bring in the ones that make you think "I am anxious about out about racial or cultural needs. Speaking out isn't easy when what this might be." If that means you as an organisation the environment is ill-equipped to deal with it. conceding your current priorities, that's the only way you're really going to change.'

disruptive or aggressive.' These are labels easily placed on outspoken dancers of colour, who in turn are shunned, gaslighted and ignored for speaking out. The responsibility and accountability to create safer spaces lies at the top – from teachers to artistic directors – and this change needs to be led by those who are fully supportive of the process.

Yet are institutions ready for empowered young dancers of

For Seeta Patel, an award-winning Bharatanatyam and

contemporary choreographer, meeting these needs can only begin

when 'the notion of change, of shaking things up, of being radical

and trying to prioritise things differently isn't seen as negative,

Shannelle 'Tali' Fergus. Photo: Sam Pyatt Fergus imagines a more robust screening process, focused on determining the potential for power abuse, racial discrimination, favouritism and bullying. 'It absolutely should be on the list of things to look at,' she continues. These initiatives may seem like box-ticking, she adds, but 'as long as a young person has a teacher, mentor or

someone with more experience to talk to, for them to feel validated in

Thomas 'Talawa' Prestø, Artistic Director of Norwegian Tabanka

says. 'It's not about that. Real accountability is a need to be so

truly understands what has happened or not.'

Dance Ensemble, thinks we have to stop with 'the right thing to do'

argument. 'We keep wanting [organisations] to emotionally get it,' he

professional that it doesn't depend on whether an individual person

their feelings, that is still productive.'

In Norway, schools are expected to have yearly competence seminars on queer and gay perspectives, and government staff in management positions must attend 'pink competence courses' on sexuality and orientation. 'But they can go their entire career without having to attend a single seminar about competence when it comes to racism, ethnicity and discrimination,' Prestø adds.

He argues from a document drafted for schools on matters dealing

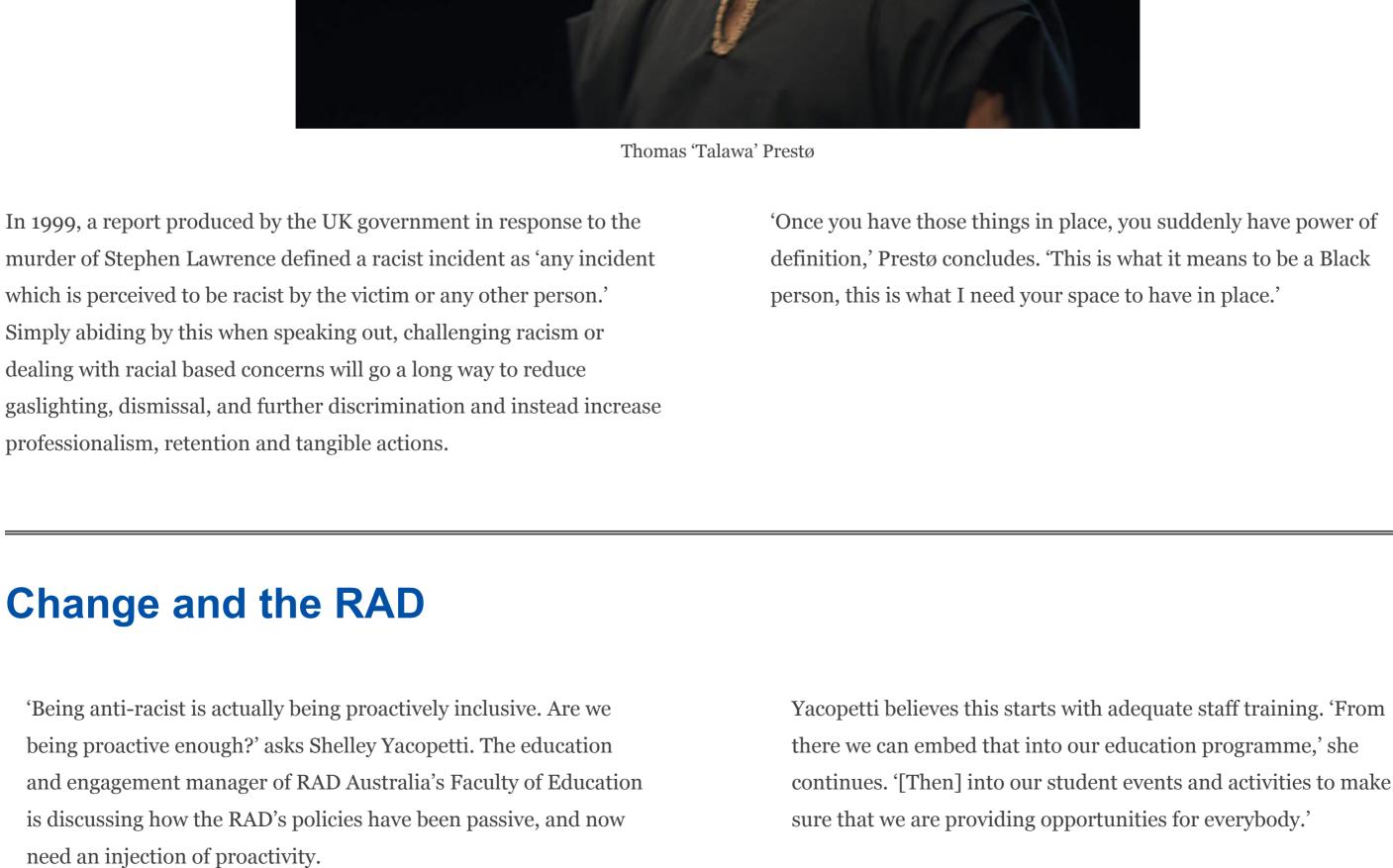
with racism and believes it should form the basis of a legally binding

file for arts institutions across the world. Such a file would detail

protocol for racism incidents by and from audiences, employees,

performers and hired external professionals, as well as for an

institution itself accused of racist practices.



'Teachers have a very amazing sense of influence over students,' she adds. 'They get to embed creativity, physicality, the love of movement. Imagine if they did that through the lens of racial equity. "Am I providing an inclusive environment for everybody? Are all of my students comfortable? Are their parents comfortable? Are they in an environment where they can thrive?" We realised that there was no checklist of what and what not to do.'

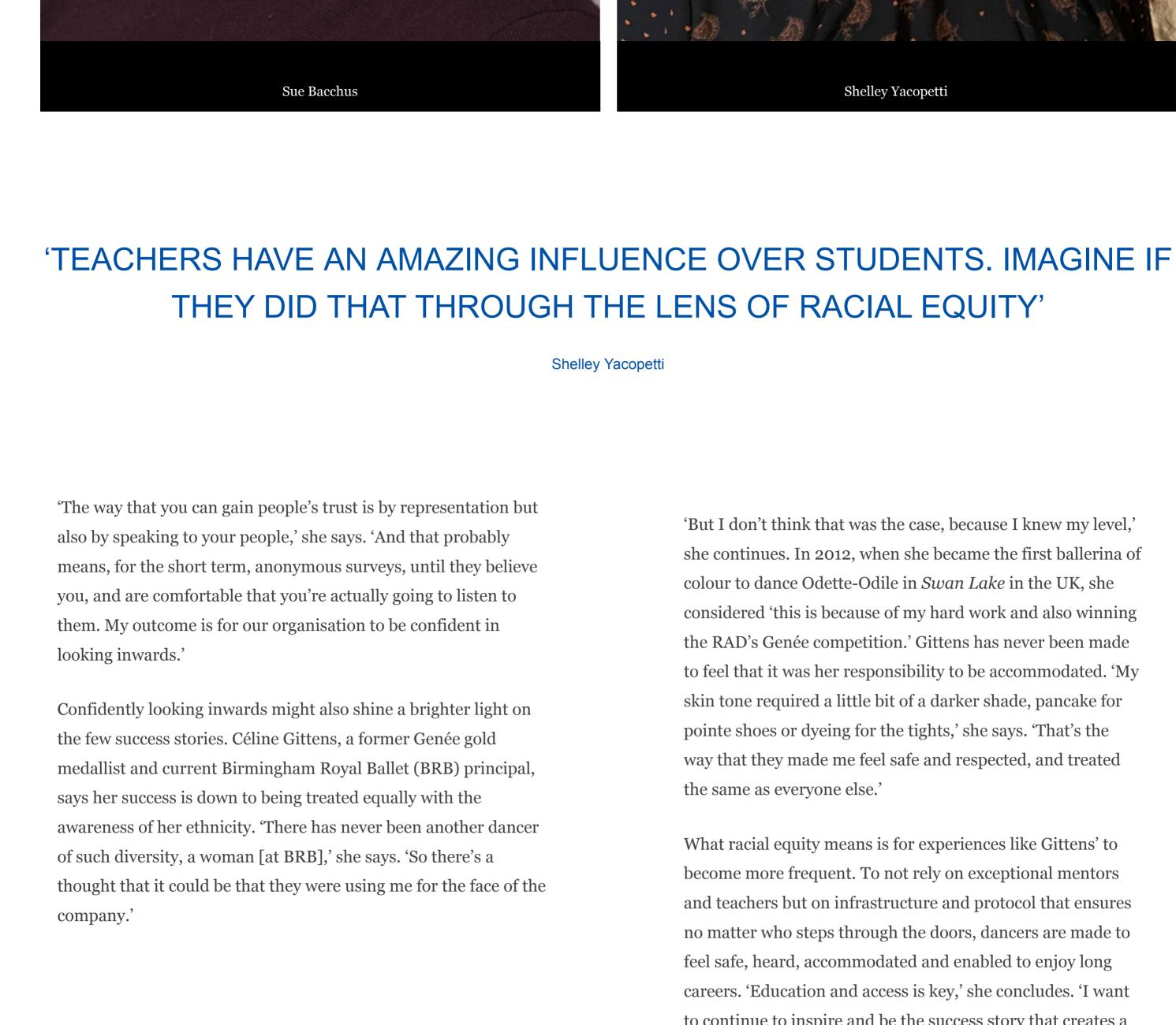
but isn't sure 'that we make best use of our diversity.' For progress to be made, she believes the organisation needs to confidently look inwards and gain the trust of its diverse staff who may still feel apprehensive about speaking out and offering solutions.

The RAD has set up equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

working groups, to tackle such questions. On the anti-racism

working group, Sue Bacchus, Head of Trading at the RAD in

London for the past 14 years, acknowledges staff are fairly diverse



Shelley Yacopetti 'But I don't think that was the case, because I knew my level,' she continues. In 2012, when she became the first ballerina of colour to dance Odette-Odile in Swan Lake in the UK, she considered 'this is because of my hard work and also winning the RAD's Genée competition.' Gittens has never been made to feel that it was her responsibility to be accommodated. 'My skin tone required a little bit of a darker shade, pancake for pointe shoes or dyeing for the tights,' she says. 'That's the way that they made me feel safe and respected, and treated the same as everyone else.' What racial equity means is for experiences like Gittens' to become more frequent. To not rely on exceptional mentors

and teachers but on infrastructure and protocol that ensures

no matter who steps through the doors, dancers are made to

careers. 'Education and access is key,' she concludes. 'I want

to continue to inspire and be the success story that creates a

beacon of hope for these dancers.'

Céline

Gittens in

Swan Lake

at

Birmingham

Royal Ballet.

Photo: Roy

Smiljanic

Isaac Ouro-Gnao is a Togolese-British multidisciplinary artist

and freelance journalist.

What steps would make dance classes more inclusive and welcoming? What information would help you as a teacher?

☑ LET US KNOW

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feel safe, heard, accommodated and enabled to enjoy long