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## **RESEARCH YOVO YOVO MEMOIRE by ZOE and Sophie Yukiko**

YOVO YOVO MEMOIRÉ is an interdisciplinary research project in which the performance artists ZOE and Sophie Yukiko collaborative explore the field of tension and intersection between different artistic practices of Black communities and its origins from an Afro-American-European perspective. The questions of how cultural experiences and histories are anchored in bodies and behavior and are continued in artistic forms of expression as well as in social and spiritual interactions are at the center of the research.

The first part and starting point is an examination of the cultural practice of the Fon, a population group in Benin (formerly the Kingdom of Dahomey), as well as the transmission of Fon culture in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, or MAAFA, into the diaspora. A particular focus here is on the spiritual and cultural practice of the Vodoun, which is demonstrably the oldest belief system in Benin. The second part focuses on the dialog with the diaspora through a trip to New Orleans, a stronghold for performance art, music and Vodoun, as well as the exchange with artists, experts and academics who take a decolonial perspective on Black culture in their work. The third part of the project is dedicated to evaluating our experiences and encounters. The project will be followed by a stage production entitled MAWU LISA, under the artistic direction of ZOE and the dramaturgy of Sophie Yukiko, co-produced by tanzhaus NRW in fall 2025. The research results form a direct basis for the play. The work aims to trace the transformation and continuity of West African cultural practices such as Vodoun from its origins to the diaspora, between heterogenization and tradition. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the history and forms of Afro-diasporic art and culture and to work out the cultural and spiritual intersections. For non-academic art forms that have emerged from Black culture and artists from the corresponding field, the research results should form an archive for the German-speaking world and thus strengthen their position in the contemporary art canon.

## **PRODUCTION MAWU LISA by ZOE**

MAWU LISA is an interdisciplinary stage play under the artistic direction of ZOE and the dramaturgy of Sophie Yukiko. MAWU LISA tells a story of the African diaspora in the aesthetics of an Afro-futuristic fairy tale. Thematically, the production deals with heterogeneity and homogeneity as well as the intersection within Afro-diasporic life realities, the search for cultural heritage, a spiritual practice and the shared longing for home and community. MAWU LISA is a departure from old narratives and a self-determined tale about Black bodies and the richness of Black culture, especially diasporic culture. In doing so, the piece approaches the meanings and relationships of (chosen) family and identity, duality and unity, ecstasy and trance, trauma and integration, and creates space for rehabilitation and imagining a future. The research serves both to differentiate the content-related themes and to offer us new impulses and approaches to producing theater that can be community-oriented in form and structure and a conscious, spiritual process. YOVO YOVO MEMOIRE and MAWU LISA is a German project supported by tanzhaus NRW and co-financed by the Kunststiftung NRW. The performance MAWU LISA is co-produced by tanzhaus NRW and planned for fall 2025.

### **ZOE (Artistic Direction, Choreography)**

is an Afro-German interdisciplinary performance artist and curator from Düsseldorf. Her work addresses power relations, marginalization and the (re)appropriation of bodies and space, with a particular focus on the visibility and empowerment of structurally discriminated people. ZOE is one of the trailblazers of ballroom culture in Germany and played a key role in shaping this scene as a member of the House of Melody, the first German ballroom house. Today she is the German Mother of the New York Ballroom House of Elle. As her performer she has been contributed to multiple stage works such as Chombotrope, an awarded play that dealt with the dynamics of cultural appropriation. Chombotrope has toured globally and was invited to tanzhaus NRW, Kölner Schauspielhaus, the Berliner Festspiele, Africa Moment Festival (Barcelona), Spring in Autumn (Utrecht) and Goethe Institut Kampala (Uganda) und Nairobi (Kenia). Since 2019 her own performances and productions, including "Black Magic", "Feminine Fragments" and "FEMINA SAGA", have been staged throughout Germany. She has received numerous honors, such as the Community Legacy Award of the German Ballroom Community (2022) and the Förderpreis for Performing Arts Düsseldorf and a one year Scholarship of Frauenkultur Büro NRW in 2024 . ZOE is active throughout Europe as a performer, lecturer and curator and promotes ballroom culture in NRW with her collective Shapes&Shades. She currently lives in Düsseldorf with her Daughter.

<https://theartofzoe.com/>

### **Sophie Yukiko (Dramaturgy, Choreography)**

is a German-American writer, curator and performance artist whose work explores themes of heritage, violence, subculture and the notion of community. She has been working as a screenwriter since 2020. She became known primarily as part of the Ballroom scene, in which she has been active for ten years and is known as founding mother Yukiko Laveaux. As the daughter of artist Herbert Hasters and former dancer Elisabeth-Clarke Hasters, Sophie Yukiko grew up surrounded by theater and dance. She began her career as a freelance dancer in 2009 and was particularly influenced by the subcultural dance scenes in Los Angeles and New York City. In 2019, she celebrated her debut as a choreographer with the performance art project "HE R E", which deals with the lack of visibility of queer and non-white people and the effects on mental health. Her concept film "HE R E" was published by the art magazine MONOPOL. Another concept film "Rated X" was published by VOGUE and dealt with the legacy of racism in research and the stigmatization of non-white and LGBTQI\* people in the context of HIV. In 2020 same year, she developed the theater piece "INDIGO", which premiered at the Moving Concrete Festival. A short film of the same name, which she directed and produced, was screened at Soho House. In 2022, she took over the artistic direction at the Volksbühne during the "Give me Life Festival" and curated the "Icons Galore Ball 2", which had a sold-out house. Since 2019, Sophie Yukiko has held residencies at Heizhaus/Uferstudios Berlin, the European Center for the Arts Hellerau in Dresden and the Berlin HAU (Hebbel am Ufer Teil) and Zurich Schauspielhaus. She is also writing a book about community work in subcultural spaces and is working on her first own series together with Studio Zentral.

<https://www.sophieyukiko.com/>

## **TIMETABLE AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

As the trip is scheduled right at the beginning of the year, part of the preparation (planning the trip) takes place in the run-up to the research.

### **January 2025**

Week 1 Preparation, Compilation of literature on the cultural practice of the Fon and the Vodoun as well as on Afro-diasporic art and culture.

Week 2-3 Trip to Benin, Study of the cultural practices of the Fon and the Vodoun on site.

Week 4 Analysis phase after return, Evaluation of the collected materials from Benin.

### **February 2025**

Week 5-6 Evaluation and in-depth questioning on the transformation of West African cultural practices in the diaspora. Preparation of interviews. Preparation USA trip.

Week 7-8 Literature research and interviews, Conducting and evaluating interviews

### **March 2025**

Week 9-10 Trip to New Orleans, Dialogue with the experts about performance art, jazz and vodoun in New Orleans, Exchange with artists, experts and academics with a decolonial perspective on Black culture.

Week 11-12 In-depth analysis and reflection, Consolidation and analysis of the collected experiences and encounters, Start of MAWU LISA's concept development for an artistic work based on the research.

### **April 2025**

Week 13-14 Concept development, Outline and development of the artistic concept, incorporating the research results. First experiments and sketches for the conception of MAWU LISA

Week 15-16 Documentation and reflection - Documentation of the entire research and artistic work. Reflection on the research process and the insights gained. Evaluation of the entire project and outlook for the follow-up project MAWU LISA