

# ONE STEP BEYOND

How a dance-crazy Birmingham schoolgirl grew up to own her own dance company



STEP UP: Gail in a dance routine

By Poppy Brady

IT'S A story to rival Billy Elliott – how a dance-mad little girl went from leaping round to Jimmy Cliff in her mum's living room to running her own dance company that has taken its successful productions all over the world.

A champion for African and Caribbean dance, Gail Parmel has excelled as an artistic director and choreographer to the extent that she is now included in the UK's top 50 Women to Watch List for 2010, organised by the Government-funded Cultural Leadership Programme.

## ASTONISHING

It's an astonishing achievement, but Gail remains extremely modest as she sits at her desk in the Birmingham-based ACE Dance and Music studios she set up with her husband Ian nearly three years ago.

Their company ACE, which stands for African Cultural Exchange, was actually launched a decade earlier but its dancers had no permanent home in terms of rehearsal space.

Now they have an airy studio in Floodgate Street, Digbeth, which is buzzing with dancers' chatter, a variety of classes and rehearsals for another major performance.

ACE has produced at least six works – from Solitude or Sanctuary and Entrance, to the current performance Switch and also Skin in 2008, which was performed in

Grahamstown, South Africa.

It's all a long way from Gail's home in Leeds where she was one of ten children who discovered her lifelong passion for dance as she helped her mum with chores after church on a Sunday.

"My job was to sweep down the steps and mop the passageway and there I would dance to Jimmy Cliff and Boney M," says Gail. "I remember we used to put polo neck jumpers on our heads to make long hair and pretend we were Pan's People. We worked to the music and my mum got all her cleaning done!"

Then a glimpse through a window watching a dance class at her new school – Earl Cowper Middle School in Chapeltown – further stoked the fires of Gail's dance passion.

"I couldn't wait to join that school, just for the dancing," she remembers. "Even then I was more interested in how dance was put together and later on I realised how this led to my career in choreography."

## TIMING

And with sheer good timing, she won a place at the newly opened Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Chapeltown, where 25 years later it still remains a world-class contemporary dance institution.

After completing three years of vocational training there, Gail moved to Birmingham to join the Kokuma Dance

Company, a dedicated African dance company which she says "blew my mind, because I felt so connected."

And what did her mum think of her dancing? Again, similar to a scene straight from Bill Elliott, Gail's mum had little idea of her daughter's talents until she actually watched her dance in a proper performance.

## PASSION

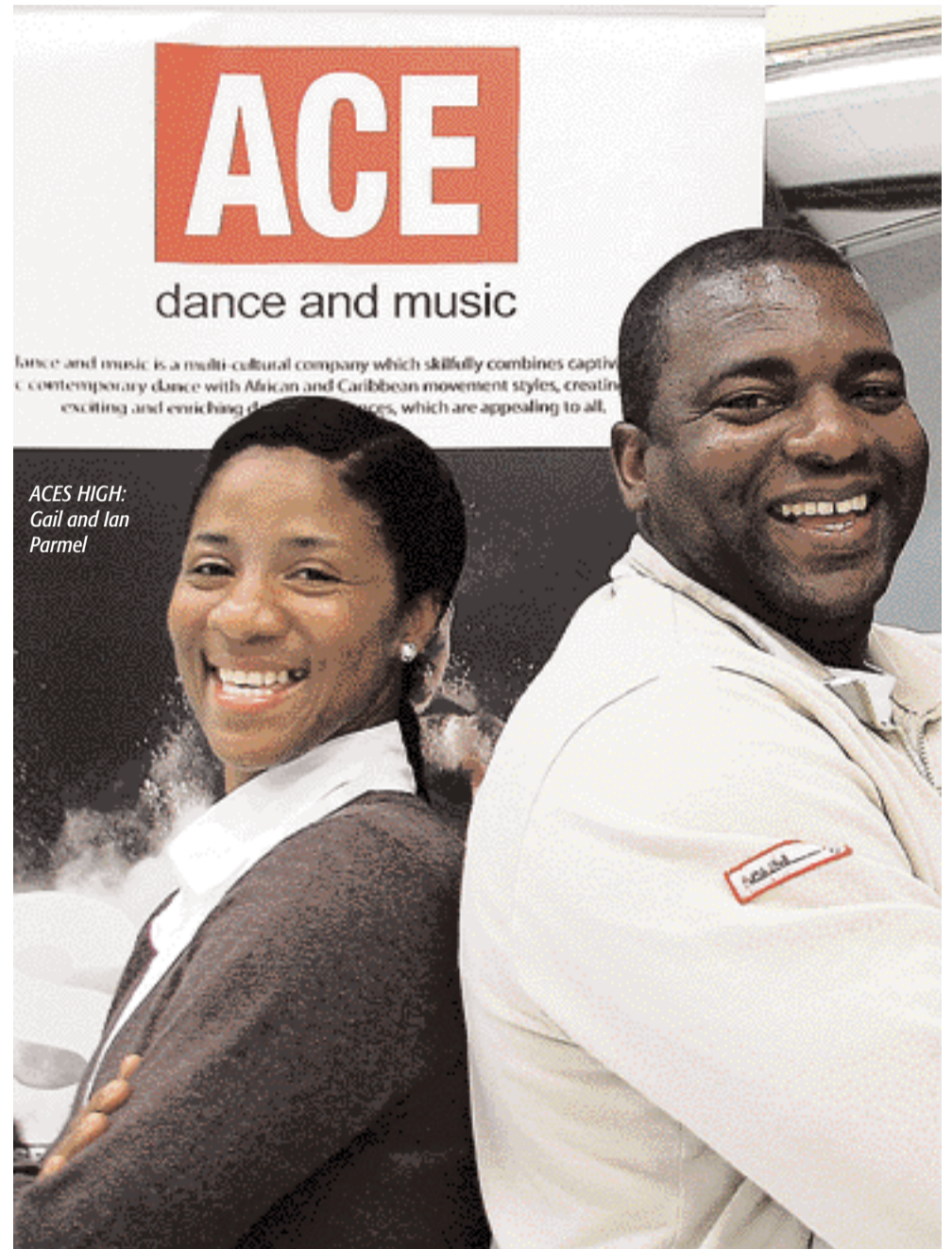
"Once mum realised how passionate I was, she supported me and has continued to do so to this day," says Gail, who returned to the Northern School in Leeds to complete a performing arts degree in just one year.

After her degree, Ian a freelance musician and steel pan player, and Gail decided to launch ACE in Birmingham and, in the early days, traded teaching classes for rehearsal place before launching their own studios.

Their studio now has a packed agenda of classes – from parents and tots to ACE Youth and adult African dance classes, plus djembe drumming with Ian.

Their next big dance production will be called Ten Strong, but Gail and Ian also have another production mission – to start a family.

They are foster parents to two sets of twins who are now in their 20s, who they fostered from the ages of five and seven, and now, after going through IVF, they are hoping to complete their dream with a baby of their own.



ACES HIGH: Gail and Ian Parmel

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 Marcia Bulgin  
 Business Consultant  
 Gleaner Voice Group  
 Tel No: 0121 678 6038  
 Mobile No: 079403298370  
 Email: Marcia.bulgin@gvmedia.co.uk  
 www.voice-online.co.uk



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