

“With Jawole, we are the same color, but I live in Africa and she lives in the U.S. We think we know each other, but we don’t, so there is this interesting *discovering* between African and African Americans.”

Germaine Acogny

“Germaine is interested, like me, in how you process ideas and concepts, not just in steps.”

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

“Like my ancestors did, I shall dance barefoot and my steps will make the earth tremble.”

Pape Ibrahima Ndiaye - Kaolack

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Say the names Vincent Mantsoe, Kettly Noël, Faustin Linyekula, Germaine Acogny, or Kaolack to most American concert dancegoers, and a blank look will be the response. Say the same names to African American dance artists like Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Reggie Wilson, or Philadelphia’s own Charles Anderson, and not only do they know these continental African dancer/choreographers, but have collaborated with them as well. There’s a wide world of contemporary African dance that American audiences simply don’t know about. Though this movement has been afoot for over two decades, with followers in Western Europe and West Africa, opportunities for American exposure have been few and far between. From 2000 until 2004 Maurine Knighton, then executive producer and president of Brooklyn’s 651 ARTS, launched a yearly series, “Black Dance: Tradition and Transformation,” that provided a venue for contemporary dance works created by people of African lineage. Tonight’s program offers another chance to bridge this gap in the American experience.

Back in the 1930s the white, swing-era jazzman, Paul Whiteman, purportedly said that jazz came to America 300 years ago in chains. Slavery is a strong link connecting people of African lineage. It is a shared legacy of pain but also of survival and transcendence, wherein individual backstories intersect with social and regional histories. It was one of the underlying themes of *The Scales of Memory*, but slavery is not the only link. There are many ties that bind. Zollar experimented with intercontinental collaboration for *Shadow’s Child* (2002), the culmination of a four-year exchange between Urban Bush Women and the National Company of Song and Dance of Mozambique. The result was a danced musical spectacle with a humanitarian message about young girls showing courage in the face of disease, discrimination, and cultural misunderstanding.

The choreographies coming out of South Africa (Mantsoe’s home), Mali (home to Haitian-born Noël), the Congo (Linyekula’s homeland), or Senegal (home to Acogny and to Kaolack, with “Kaolack”—the name of his town—taken by Pape Ibrahima Ndiya as his stage name) are as different from traditional African dance as American modern dance is from the Virginia Reel. Furthermore, as Acogny’s opening quote tells us, it’s a mistake to assume that Africans and African Americans (or Afro-Caribbeans) are one and the same. The histories and cultures are different. Nevertheless, what we discover is a complex, intertextually layered *relationship and continuity* between the dances and experiences of Africans and the various peoples of the African diaspora. (Diaspora, here, meaning communities outside of continental Africa inhabited by peoples of African descent.) There is a shared vocabulary that can be identified as coming from

Africa, just as in the world of ballet there is a common “language” that originated in Europe. I often use the terms “Africanist” and “Europeanist” to designate these two far-reaching

constellations. As choreographer and dance professor Kariamuw Welsh explains, “there are common aesthetic elements in African dances, regardless of the region of the world that the movement comes from.”

It’s because of consonances and commonalities that Urban Bush Women and Jant-Bi could dance together seamlessly in the full production of *The Scales of Memory*. (Not because of “blood,” “inborn rhythm,” or any other racialized stereotype.) Yes: they’d workshopped and rehearsed together off and on for two years, but also to be factored in is the global continuity of their pan-African dance technique which, like ballet, has become an international movement language. Some of the most obvious signposts of this Africanist technique are:

- +unabashedly expressive, dramatic movement, though abstracted in nature;
- +a storytelling aspect (although many of the stories, as in *Scales of Memory*, are not sequential in a chronological sense, but collage-like and episodic);
- +a socially engaged, politically conscious dimension (in this regard, Acogny says, “my only way for fighting against fatality is dancing”);
- +a spiritual (often ritualistic, transcendent, transformative, or ecstatic)mood or “dance” overarching the physical choreography;
- +improvisation—which is so very basic to all Africanist art forms;
- +groundedness in body posture, meaning a sure-footed contact with Mother Earth, so that even airborne jumps emphasize the coming down more than the hanging in the air (a noteworthy marker differentiating the African aesthetic from the European);
- +and an encyclopedic range of movement motifs centered around polycentric, polyrhythmic use of the body (“dancing all the drums of the body”). Ballet has a set canon of foot, limb, and torso movement configurations and air positions that we can recognize as ballet, a Europeanist form, regardless of the period or century it was choreographed. Similarly, African and African diasporan dance encompass a defining range and standard of motifs, movements, and attitudes recognizable as Africanist across national boundaries and chronological divides.

Like every alternative arts movement, contemporary diasporan dance has advocates and critics among those who have been exposed to it. The aesthetic model represented by this evening’s works poses a challenge to the established tenets of “high art” based on European criteria. Unfortunately, but an indication of the ongoing ethnic divide in our nation, some opinion falls along racial lines. In response to *Scales of Memory*, a powerful New York dance critic complains that she feels no “true choreographic collaboration, since they mostly make use of an African dance vocabulary: feet stamping hard, torsos undulating, energy released down to the ground, even in explosive, leg-whirling jumps.”<sup>1</sup> Caught in stereotypes (“stamping feet, undulating torsos”) of what is African and what collaboration should or should not be, she didn’t or couldn’t recognize the fact that Zollar’s choreography has always been rooted in an African aesthetic. Zollar combines text, musical accompaniment, and motifs inspired by African, modern, pedestrian, and social dance forms. (Furthermore, dancers and other artists of African descent struggle to avoid stereotypes yet aspire to honor their traditions.) On the plus side, a mainstream critic in Chicago encourages her readers to rush out to see *Scales*, which she characterizes as “the masterpiece of dance, theater, ritual, prayer, sexual behavior, social norms, history, and geography. . .”<sup>2</sup> From another perspective, a woman of African lineage declares that she can’t “analyze this performance in standard terms because I do not feel that words are enough to

convey what I experienced. . . . a sincerity that one rarely sees in a theater setting. . . . I felt like a participant, privileged not only to have watched but also to have been a part of something so organic, meaningful, and genuine.”<sup>3</sup>

As with other postmodern African diasporan creations, works like *Scales of Memory* and *J'Accuse*, tonight's solo by Kaolack, pose a problem: people can't figure out how to *see* them. Perhaps we need to recall how Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer and others were misunderstood several decades ago: their dances weren't dance; their dancers weren't competent; their meaning was either obscure, condescending, or trivial; maybe it wasn't even art. What happened? Well, we learned to stop comparing the new kids on the block to established icons in the dance world. We learned to accept and utilize *a new frame of reference* for assessing and ultimately enjoying their creations.<sup>4</sup> We must do the same with this next “new dance.” We have done it before: the only difference, now, is that it will take a bigger leap of faith. The jump is wider than moving from ballet to (white) postmodernism; it's bridging the gap between African and European aesthetics. Dance is a message in a cultural envelope and, this time, the envelope is brown.

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<sup>1</sup> Roslyn Sulcas, *New York Times* online archive, originally published November 20, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Hedy Weiss [Chicago Sun-Times critic], NewtworkNews.com, originally published March 8, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Chimdi Nwosu, her Buzzine.com page, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Now, the shoe is on the other foot: that same group of iconoclasts has long since become major movers in the accepted canon or “establishment” of dance as art. It is ironic, if not sad, that many of their followers find unpalatable the political, expressive, and storytelling aspects of African diasporan contemporary dance, reading these elements as naïve impediments to “art for art's sake.” Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.