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"Miriam" Anchors Black Choreographers Festival

BY JEAN SCHIFFMAN

Among the many programs at this year's multi-venue Black Choreographers Festival—coproduced by the African & African American Performing Arts Coalition (AAPAC) and K*Star*Productions—is the local premiere of New York dancer/choreographer Nora Chipaumire's "Miriam."

The two-dancer piece (Chipaumire and Okwui Okpokwasili) directed by Eric Ting, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), is part of a roster of events in San Francisco this month and next that includes classes taught by Chipaumire and local dance professionals Robert Moses and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, short pieces by emerging and established dance artists (the Next Wave Choreographers Showcase, curated by Moses) and a performance of "Draft" by Robert Moses' Kin.

First seen in 2012, "Miriam" takes its name from two biblical Miriams—the sister of Moses, and Jesus' mother—and from the late, South African singer/activist Miriam Makeba. Chipaumire, who graduated from the University of Zimbabwe before emigrating to the United States, started creating the piece in 2010, sparked by the death of Makeba (in 2008). Women in general are a huge inspiration in Chipaumire's work. On the phone from New York, she muses, "What does it take for a woman to become that iconic? What attracted me to these Miriams was how they got to be so strong. And what else was there—the demons, the dark side? I'm always interested in that, too—the demons behind these superstars."

In 1998, here in the Bay Area, she took a modern dance class at a community college and from there went on to pursue formal training at Mills College, where, as she once told an interviewer, "I studied with choreographers who helped me translate my experience, my history, into movement." She graduated with an M.F.A. in choreography and performance.

"When I first started to dance, I was very much taken by American modern dance," she continues. At a certain point, though, she realized the genre was indeed truly American, sprung from, as she says, the American psyche, American politics, an American way of looking at the body and the world. Since then she has turned more toward her native Africa for inspiration: "To make better use of my expressive tool, which is my body, I have to equally [integrate] who I am and where I come from." The result is an esteemed career that includes six years with Urban Bush Women as well as a stint as its associate artistic director, awards and fellowships (in 2011 she was a United States Artist Ford Fellow) and worldwide travel (Africa, Cuba, Jamaica and more) to study different dance forms. In 2012 she premiered "The Last Heifer" and has now embarked upon her third work since "Miriam."

Another influence in creating "Miriam" was novelist Joseph Conrad and his "Heart of Darkness." "I like working with literature," she says. "Clearly Africa is an idea, a big idea—the construct that Europeans had of

Africa, how Africa is represented. The Africa we all carry in our imaginations, whether we're Africans or not, is very much inspired by [writers like] Joseph Conrad, and it's hard to slay those beasts. It's marked all of us: Africa as the place where Europeans could let their inhibitions run wild. ... I think 'Miriam' tries to embody that darkness.

"But where there's darkness," she adds, "there's light." In "Miriam," Africa is a metaphor not just for darkness but also for beauty, for enlightenment.

Cuban-born composer/jazz pianist Omar Sosa composed an original score for "Miriam," which he played live onstage in early performances. The score was nominated for a 2013 Bessie award. For the San Francisco run, some of the score is recorded, and the two dancers voice parts of it. "It's extremely beautiful, expressive," says Chipaumire.

"Miriam" is more meditative than some of Chipaumire's other work, observes Bamuthi Joseph, who saw the piece first as a work in progress, then later in a premiere in Portland. Bringing it to the Bay Area was one of the first curatorial decisions he made since assuming the mantle of director of performing arts at YBCA. He sees "Miriam" as "intellectually rigorous almost as much as physically rigorous" and was interested in the archetypes it embodies. Dancing with Chipaumire a decade or so ago in a piece created by Robert Moses, he perceived her performance persona as "combative and outrageous and audacious."

Chipaumire laughs at that description: "I think I'm a sweet hu-

man being, really. ... I grew up during the war [Zimbabwe officially gained independence from Britain in 1980]. Certain things I'm negotiating in my body as a performer. I'm working out my demons, too."

In the performance, as described by its producer, MAPP International Productions, Chipaumire uses both movement and text [Joseph Conrad as well as contemporary Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove] to explore a woman's struggle in a restrictive man's world, "abetted and haunted by an otherworldly character, both angel and devil" (Okpokwasili). To revisit "Miriam" now is, she says, "quite wonderful ... to keep interrogating a piece and let it interrogate you. ... Because I am the writer and performer, the work speaks to me differently each time I do it ... it's quite a harrowing process of going back to that thing that instigated it but also to realize I have the power to shift it. ... Things I was keen on [years ago] I'm not so keen on now, or maybe my body can't or won't do them. I have to find something that's working with my body now, and that has intellectual and spiritual resonance of where I am now."

Observes AAPAC executive director Laura Elaine Ellis, who has seen Chipaumire's development as an artist over a long span, "I knew her piece would be provocative.... She's an incredible spirit, a powerhouse as a performer, so charismatic. In this piece, she's really talking about the idea of the other, and of isolation. She pushes you in and draws you away at the same time."

Ellis and Kendra Kimbrough Barnes of K*Star*Productions orga-

nized the 10-year-old Festival with an eye to matching the various programs and performances with partnering nonprofits: YBCA, Dance Mission and ODC (and, in Oakland, Laney College). "Curating the program is about what works and will do best in those venues as well as what do the artists [themselves] want to present," explains Ellis. "Kendra and I want to provide space and opportunity."

The Next Wave showcase of 15 or 20 short pieces covers genres from hip hop to traditional African to contemporary modern influenced by the African diaspora, as well as jazz, and possibly also ballet, dance-theater, social dance, hula, the Lindy Hop. Bamuthi Joseph is especially enthused about the day-long series of classes, open to the public for 50 cents (for up to five different, hour-long classes): "That populist way of approaching dance education and dance in general—I love that the Festival is not just about watching the work but also sweating and getting sore," he comments.

Looking back, Ellis says that one of the messages of the Festival is that "you can have African dance not just in an ethnic dance festival. And it does not have to feel like a talent show—there's a high standard of art on the mainstage." This year's Festival theme—"Here & Now"—speaks to the fact that African-American and African-derived dance, and the stories they tell, "can resonate... can transcend race," says Ellis.

Feb. 9: Classes

Feb. 13 → 15: "Miriam"
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
701 Mission St., 978-ARTS

Feb. 21 → 23
Next Wave
Dance Mission Theater
3316 24th St., 826-4441

Mar. 6 → 8
Robert Moses' Kin
ODC Theater
3153 17th St. 863-9834

Feb. 28 → Mar. 1
Works by Joanna Haigood, Gregory Dawson and Portsha Jefferson
Laney College Theatre
900 Fallon St., Oakland
866/553-5885
bcfhereandnow.com

New York dancer/choreographer Nora Chipaumire presents "Miriam" at the Black Choreographers Festival February 13-15.

