

## Push Dance Company presents ‘Bitter Melon’

By: **Andrea Pflaumer** | 05/21/12 4:00 AM  
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We pass them every day – quaint historical relics, echoes of local heroes and distant battles. But for choreographer Raissa Simpson, the Dewey Monument in Union Square – a tribute to Admiral George Dewey’s Spanish-American War victory in Manila Bay – echoes through her Filipina DNA.

This weekend, Simpson presents an outdoor multimedia performance at the monument titled “Bitter Melon,” a reference to the very astringent, watery melon popular in Asian cuisine.

“By my ancestry I’m tied to water,” Simpson says. “I’m showing how water, so essential to life, can be devastating when used as a weapon.”

She explains how in the 1890s, the American Navy turned on former Philippine allies in the war with the Spanish (who introduced waterboarding) to wage a complex and brutal colonial war.

Decades later, her African-American grandfather, one of more than 300,000 people who left the Deep South in the 1920s, worked at San Francisco’s naval shipyards.

“We’ve heard about the great migration and thought it was because of segregation, but actually it was because of the great flood in Mississippi of 1927. A lot of people who lived on the levee were just washed away when the levee broke.”

A classically trained dancer, Simpson’s sinewy work invokes a sense of the water’s current and flow through movements influenced by an Afro-Asian sensibility.

“In my culture’s movement, undulation comes from within. It’s that feeling, rippling through us, that I play with.” Award-winning historical videographer Ben Wood will project film of the dancers, plus archival images from the war, onto the Dewey Monument. “My work uses video to project onto spaces their stories; spaces that we don’t pay attention to or look at immediately,” he says.

To make the project come alive, Wood’s projections will be in 3-D, making it appear as if the dancers are landing right on a stage floor that consists of two runways to either side of the monument.

“Raissa and I have a similar creative process,” Wood says. “We’re doing something literally outside of the box – not for a small screen. This is a fine art, experimental project, not a commercial one.”



COURTESY PHOTO  
Multimedia show: Push Dance Company — including, from left, Matthew Wickett, Breton Tyner-Bryan, Olutola Afolayan and Kyle Limin — presents free performances of “Bitter Melon” in Union Square this weekend.

For those who want a front-row view, Simpson cautions: “We’re going to be exploring water – so people might get wet. The dancers’ hair will be wet, their clothes will be wet. We play into the question of how we might look if we were in a flood or waterboarded.”