

Interchange

by Wanda Sabir



SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2010

Great Integration: A Hip Hop Chamber Opera

Robert Henry Johnson presents the Buriel Clay Playwrights Festival 5, featuring Fannie-Lee Lowe's exquisitely wrought *QUARTET PLUS THREE*, Sunday, June 13th and Sunday June 27th @ 3pm at Sheba Lounge, 1419 Fillmore Street at O'Farrell in San Francisco, FREE TO THE PUBLIC. Please support this magnificent black female playwright.

RHJ is also the *Blackswordsman* and *Prophet* in the *Hip Hop Chamber Opera: Great Integration*, having it's Bay Area Premiere this weekend, June 18-19, 2010 at ODC Theatre.

Sold out opening night, *Great Integration* is a tale of the end of the world . . . if you were trying to get tickets; it's the story of the end of a relationship for *Temptress*, and the start of something new for the *Black Swordsman* as he quits his body and moves on. It's a story of forgiveness and retribution . . . regret and remorse, remorse over not living according to a higher good, even if you are the only one toting this value around.



I had forgotten that someone always dies in an opera, even a hip hop opera with a small ensemble or chamber orchestra—it's still serious pathos, angst and passion. In fact, in "Without Goodbyes," composer JooWan Kim dedicates the composition to his friend, Michael Kinney and to all those who died suddenly or too soon.

Wearing ceremonial white, MC Kirby Dominant too calls the names of ancestors, his two brothers during the libation, while Christopher Nicholas's voice, the balm in Gilead, soothes the passage. Dominant's lyrics or poetry—the libretto, is certainly thought-provoking especially when Raissa Simpson's choreography doesn't exactly follow the script, but it works. Hip hop recognizes its lineage here—creative black music, jazz—where innovation is the name of the tune every time. There is even a moment in the piece where the audience is invited to participate—get noisy, while Dominant freestyles along with the dancers, who improvise solos one after the other. Raissa's is quite spectacular.



JooWan plays piano in bare feet—now I've heard of singers taking off their shoes, but pianists? Whatever works, right? And JooWan certainly played well opening night.

I would have liked to be able to read the libretto, at times I wasn't clear who was whom. The personalities to watch though were Raissa's *Temptress* and Robert Henry Johnson's *The Black Swordsman/Prophet*, although Jetta Martin's *Hero*, Kat Worthington's *Virgin* and Julian Pham's *Leader* didn't quite live up to their characteristics. I liked *Virgin* best. She was a no-nonsense presence who felt no pity for the dying *Swordsman* after all he'd put her and her people through. It was like die, while *Temptress* was feeling regret and sorrow. I wasn't even in the piece, I was telling her to save her pity

for a more worthy soul.

I wasn't aware of the love interest there until the really lovely aerial dance which illustrated-- *Temptress and Black Swordsman's* relationship -its comings and goings. . . the fragile connection linked through literal fingertips . . . it was a lovely moment.

The parallels between the *Prophet* and the *Black Swordsman* are clear: both have power of life and death; both invite hatred and love; both can potentially exploit the faith of others and to a certain degree both do.

What *Temptress* shows is that evil done unto you is not permission to commit evil in return. Evil is evil. The temptation to "do unto others..." is an externalized reality in Raissa's character. What *Prophet/Black Swordsman* shows is the duality that is one's life and how one's lesser self has to die before one can live honestly and free. *Great Integration* is also a commentary on how little control each of us exercises over his or her lives. *Great Integration* tells us to let go of the tight, yet tenuous hold we think we have on the journey's direction or outcome.

It's a lot easier that way.



When the opera ends, "Temptress" is holding the Prophet's book, albeit upside down. Is the final lesson, knowledge is power or is the lesson one has to study the enemy to outsmart the enemy? MC Kirby Dominant probably said something deep to this point, but I couldn't write fast enough to get it down. JooWan Kim is bringing *The Great Integration* music to Yoshi's in San Francisco, July 25, 2010. And if you miss the Bay Area premiere, Raissa Simpson's Push Dance Company is taking the hip hop opera dance performance, *Great Integration*, renamed per JooWan's request to *The Saga of the Black Swordsman*, to Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer Street, New York, NY, July 23-24.

Visit their website: <http://www.pushdance.org/> and <http://goldenfetus.com/>



The wonder chamber orchestra musicians are: JooWan Kim- composition/piano, Christopher Nicholas- voice, Valentino Pellizzer- drums, Kirby Dominant- MC and other rotating personnel including; Jacob Bertrand- composition, Tracy Goodwin, Jill Heinke- flute, Ricki Nelson- clarinet, Liana Berube, Ken Lin- violin, Achilles Liarmakopoulos- trombone, Rob Woodcock-bass

Read more: <http://www.myspace.com/ensemblemiknawooj#ixzz0traMwud1>

Pictures above are: Raissa Simpson with my niece, Wilda Batin, JooWan Kim with Kirby Dominant and Robert Henry Johnson; JooWan Kim with Christopher Nicholas, and Raissa Simpson with two friends.



Note to Readers: Black Swordsman Saga is the new working title for the hip-hop opera performed mid-June. The new title debuted July 23, 2010 at Joyce SoHo in New York.