



Interchange

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Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now 2011

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I just returned from a wonderful opening weekend performance at *Black Choreographer Festival: Here & Now 2011* featuring a star studded line-up of artists who've graced the stage over the past seven years. Held at Laney College Theatre instead of Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts Theatre, I was surprised when I found parking on the street and lots of empty seats in the auditorium. However, that was soon remedied when several folks scooted into the row where I was seated just before curtain--I think they were the *Diouf Fan Club*, 'cause when Baba Zak and Mama Naomi came on stage to close out the evening, all of the folks to my right and in front started clapping and singing along--

I was in the cool section for sure.

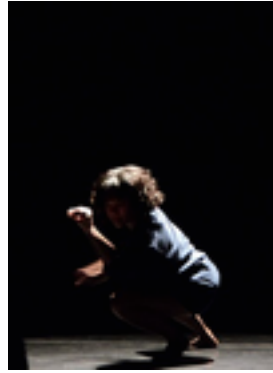


Even before the two festival founders, Laura Elaine Ellis and Kendra Kimbrough, came on stage to introduce the evening's line-up, the show had already begun with Tyler Knowlin, whose piece, "Manhattan," looked at the noise that surrounds us daily and how one needs to find *space*--translate *peace*, within the chaos. Funny, we both put our ear plugs in at about the same time as he stepped up onto the wooden floor and proceeded to wow us with his meditation--later stepping off into the twilight still dancing until he was no more.

It was like that all evening--DEEP. Not so deep one couldn't follow the train of thought or phrase into or along its natural trajectory . . . but thought provoking in a way one often is not used to when one just wants to be entertained. Thematically and aesthetically, the performances all left us a little more evolved than before we arrived--I mean evolved as human beings. After all, isn't this what art is all about anyway?

Take for instance, Mahealani's mediation in "Full Moon Sister," her nemesis's shadow looming in all its splendor behind the dancer, a back drop for the lovely interpretive movement--magical!

We shifted from city streets and moon beams to Brazilian creation myths in a matter of minutes--the latter posed or juxtaposed by choreographer/dancer Paco Gomes, as he asks the question: Did God create man in his image or vice versa in "Niu Aye (2009)"?



Raissa Simpson's excerpt of "Mixed Messages" was among my favorite pieces simply for the joy of movement inherent in the work. Simpson was all over the stage, smiling and leaping and covering the floor with her body--dressed for a workout, the audience along for the ride. I wanted to be up there with her having fun. Lithe and poised and sexy and cute-- Simpson showed us how in control she was of the space, her body, the motion and emotions stirred by her song. (Raissa's preview of "Mixed Messages," is having a premiere at MoAD soon.) Then Mahealani returned with "Ke Anu O Waimea," a traditional hula. So elegant and beautifully rendered --I could have watch her for hours--the hula so relaxing.

The evening closed as previously mentioned with "Serer Suite" choreographed by Naomi and Zak Diouf. The Serers are the fishermen and boat builders in Senegal and Gambia. I reflected on these men whom I last saw just over a month ago and hung out with a couple of years ago while in Rufisque and Dakar and wondered how they would be portrayed in the work.

From the lovely costumes worn by the women to the two male soloists, one man Filipino, not to mention the live drumming, Diamano Couro was certainly a fitting conclusion to a wonderful program--and a wonderful tribute to the fishermen and boat builders who are central to the Senegalese economy. The country's traditional dish is fish and rice --sorry I don't know how to say it in Wolof--well I used to know and I've forgotten how to say it. (Diamano Coura has a performance at the Malonga Center next month, March 12, 2011.)

