

Interchange

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2012 --- Black Choreographers Here and Now

Festival 2012 Week 2 --- By Wanda Sabir

I could have claimed the Bay Bridge closure for my lateness, but I am usually late—or just on time. I surprise myself when I am early. Seriously, this weekend I have felt really tired and tonight I have a scratchy throat. When I got to the West Oakland BART station passengers were returning to their cars and I got a great parking spot in the full lot, hurriedly ran up the stairs to the platform where a San Francisco train was approaching. Before I knew it we were at 24th Street Station.

When I got to Dance Mission the door was locked and I was like, oh no, I hope someone hears the doorbell. In the past, I have just been out of luck (smile). I don't think anyone did—hear the doorbell, that is, but Kaylah Marin and her friend were leaving and opened the door for me. When I got upstairs, after the “you are always late” jokes, I was escorted to the standing room only space where quite a few people stood.

I could not see at all.



Short and in the back, I didn't have a chance so I moved to a spot closer to the front and saw an empty seat—I asked the woman if the chair was occupied as I moved the program and sat down. She said a friend was coming late, but I knew her friend wasn't going to be able to get into the building if she was not in it already.

She didn't arrive and I was able to stay in my front row seat—I was impressed with myself as I said a little prayer of thanks (smile). No matter how many times I see "When Words Become Flesh," it never ceases to amaze me -its lyricism and beauty unimaginable. The way the writer, Marc Bamuthi Joseph takes his life and paints these scenes that draw us into the canvas as if we were new fathers too, as if we were stuck in a village in Africa with a white woman who tells us to distract the villagers and without a common language Marc starts to dance--we are there with him as he explores rain forest decimation in Richmond, California, West Oakland, Bayview. The rainforest we save is not in the Amazon, but here on the block where we can't breath, find decent water or clean soil to grow vegetables. Guess again, the rain forest we are destroying is also our relationships, something difficult to plant again once it is uprooted.

The themes broached in "Words Become Flesh" like misplaced notions of what it means to be a man and how painful it can be for a black man to explain to his son what a disadvantage it is to come packaged in a container without any redemption value, especially when dad doesn't control the market, coupled with an exploration of how negroes were manufactured in vitro, the child of racism and capitalism--I am wowed anew.

I didn't remember the aspect of the story where the father tells his son how he is not going to marry his mother, that his conception was in fact a betrayal of a trust, that his son probably signaled the end of his father's relationship with the woman he really loves. He tells his son, he wishes he would just go away . . . but of course the child doesn't. There is the addition to the narrative, the story about a younger father -15 who believes in pro-choice until the choice is to remove the fetus he planted.

I do remember the natural childbirth scene, both the class and the delivery room; I remember the reflections on how strong women are built--to endure so much pain without the haze drugs induce. I also remember the conversation with the elder grandfather who tells the young father (23) as he flatlines three times that he met the youngster on the other side on his way in and that he is beautiful.

Micah looks like his great grandfather, the narrator says. Imagine words becoming flesh--it is not an abstract notion as Bamuthi's words clothed in the flesh of five men on stage create life, a literal life form that walks into the theatre for the 7 p.m. show.

Flesh is real.

Okay, I am writing in abstractions now--the *vévé* is not on the theatre floor as it was in the first production of *Words* or one of the productions. The reference to the illustration of the creation myth might pass over the head of the uninitiated, but that's okay. *Words* is a study, which is another lesson this story tells. The idea that one's cosmology is fixed or neocolonial dish served on a palate from different shores is contested in *Words Become Flesh*--this story, this specific story is about a young father, but within the story of conception and attitude switches and second chances and youth, the indelible experience of life--its creation and destruction is hope for the parents too, in this case the new father.

The narrator holds the brushes --he faces the easel, and the painting he is erasing as he looks for a truer likeness is the mirror mirror journey new parents often experience as one frivolous act becomes a lifelong commitment.

The man the character becomes is a better man based on the thoughtfulness *Words* induces. He is a better man, not perfect, but better, because he thinks about what he has done and then what he has to do. Conception is a journey, *Words* teaches us, a journey that doesn't end with the child's birth. The relationship between parent and child is flesh (this physical container) and beyond that--it is an opportunity to be a better citizen in this flesh one might have taken for granted prior to the responsibility of parenthood.

It is atonement or it can be.

The hip hop notion of love: fast and furious and the father's advice to his son to slow it down and listen better to the women or girl's cries, which in retrospect he says might have been cries for help or cries of pain, rather than pleasure, is also one of many poignant moments in the story.

Typical Bamuthi -*Words Become Flesh*, with its cast of 5 actors: Khalil Anthony, Dahlak Brathwaite, Daveed Diggs, Michael Wayne Turner III, B. Yung, and a DJ, Dion Reiner-Guzma, was magnificent closing night (afternoon). It was an experience, a theatrical experience, that few could pull off, but Marc Bamuthi Joseph does so well--take his personal experience and realize its broader application --his story, like Eve Ensler's "Vagina Monologues"--make the facets of the stone a face in the saga, makes the whole a bit easier to digest because the audience can place the experience in several bodies instead of one. Marc's story is one man's journey, as with Eve the monologues are many voices distilled.

Parenting like sex is a universal story.

The choreography and lighting and music--hip hop, the men adept at speaking and dancing at the same time, the work the place between theatre and dance performance, is superb as well.

What a perfect balance the closing weekend of performances of the male centered work: When *Words Become Flesh*, to have the evening performances feature women choreographers, strong women choreographers whose works looked at women's stories whether that was Naomi Diouf's "Mah Wey" which looks at "Women and War to Mapassa/ONE" with Headmistress, Amara Tabor-Smith and Sherwood Chen and Pablo Lázaro, which looks at the separation of the male and female and what it might take to reunite the two aspects of the whole being once again.

"Evolution of a Secured Feminine" (2007) choreographed and performed by Camille A. Brown, set the tone for the evening with her sassy character, eyes shielded by the jaunty tip of her hat, costume a combination of tails and tux--the set initially a circle of light, then a chair in that moving beam. She said during the Q&A that using the voice of Betty Carter, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nancy Wilson, she allowed the story to unfold of a woman who refused to allow herself to stay bound to circumstances beyond her control whether that was infidelity or boredom. This character is free, not without heartache, but certainly without regret.

Raissa Simpson's Shoulder, as in strong shoulders. . . the kind one wants to lean on or lay one's head upon, was a beautiful duet which began similar to "Mapassa/ONE"--in the shadows, the two dancers on the floor in the dark. Breton Tyner-Bryan and Olutola Afolayan -strong physically, with powerful presence on stage embodied what the choreographer explained, the genesis of black women political presence, whether that was Shirley Chisholm, first woman candidate for president or Angela Y. Davis. From the "Depth of My Inner Sole," Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards work which she said closing night was all improvisational. We started out in the dark . . . listening to the rhythm of the dance steps. One knows intellectually that tap is musical, but unless one is made to use other senses than sight, the musicality of the medium is often overshadowed by our dependence visual clues.

There was live drumming, Ajayi Lumumba Jackson played drums and then with "Mapassa/ONE" he played bass clarinet and percussion.

I loved the sensuality of "Mapassa/ONE." The two aspects of the being tangled on the floor—arms and feet, heads and hands rising and falling away and towards one another even when a part. There seemed to be a negative attraction both joined and disengaged almost simultaneously.

The light—circles like islands, the flights one stage from separate airports. They would seem to be headed in the same direction only to pass one another up—it was rather frustrating to watch. Why didn't the male entity lift the female aspect of himself up when she clearly needed a hand? Why was the female aspect so quick to pick him up and carry him?

Why are black women portrayed as the strong all the time? Why can't black men lift her up? As the dancers—Amara and Pakito performed, the dances tapping into the African lexicon lending a sacred aspect to the work—which even before I read the description and Amara and Pakito shared its genesis, we already knew what they were saying—I just never knew that the Dogon Kingdom was where the story of our fall from heaven and the two pieces we split into came from—it's the Genesis story as well, without Damballa. I guess it's Humpty Dumpty.

Human beings are falling and getting up and losing parts of themselves in the debris that follows the toppling all the time. I guess as long as we keep the larger parts in sight, in the midst of the slivers and ground glass that gets lost when worlds collide or crash. Scientifically it is said that the broken bone is stronger than the original fracture, but that is only when the break is clean. Clean break? What is a clean break or clean fracture . . . one where the fall is anticipated and we learn how to land without damage?

In "Mapassa/ONE" the two characters, the two facets of the shared soul are at war with each other—the one seems to enjoy being split as if half-functional is better than 100 percent. I think we can get used to under performance when amnesia kicks in and we forget what wholeness looks and feels like.

The close of week 2 of *Black Choreographers Festival Here and Now* was thought provoking with stellar performances by all. "Mah Wey," which was an excerpt from a larger work, which will debut at Diamno Coura West African Dance Company's "Collage" later this spring, is such a wonderful celebration—the drumming and dance and lovely colors, this time women in veils, lifts one's spirits even with the topic is heavy, like this one which looks at women during the time of war.