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Push Dance

Company: 'Unlock'



Anna Marie Panlilio

Adriann Ramirez (left), Elizabeth Sheets, Jhia Jackson and Katerina Wong.

Mary Ellen Hunt

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Love isn't like a grindstone that does the same thing to everything it touches, declares Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God"; love is like the sea - a moving thing that takes its shape from the shore it meets, and that's different with every shore.

The resonance that choreographer Raissa Simpson found in Hurston's classic 1937 novel inspired her latest work, "Unlock," which the 8-year-old Push Dance Company premieres at the Zaccho SF dance space this weekend, on a program that showcases 10 years of Simpson's work.

"I first read this novel on a hot summer day in New York, and I couldn't let go of it," says Simpson. "I could never forget the story of this woman who was searching for her authentic self through other people and through love in the hope that she would be happy, but finally at end of the book, she was alone."

"Unlock" finds Simpson collaborating with set designer Benito Steen and composer and cellist Unwoman (Erica Mulkey). In an effort to make Hurston's story more current, she has set her version in Bayview-Hunters Point.

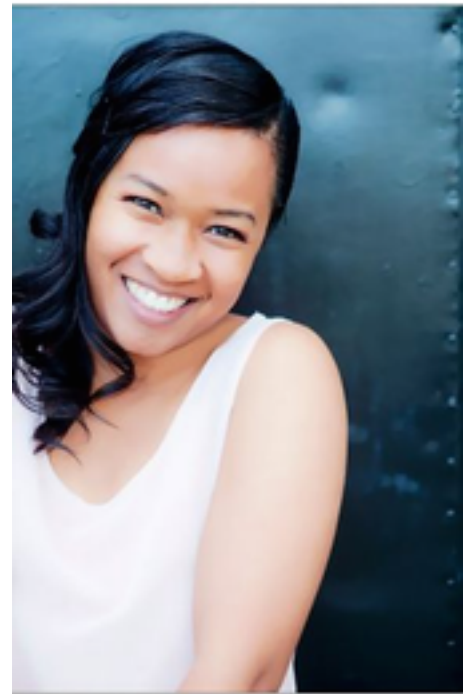
"I wanted to explore love in this community," she says. "For me, this book was the first time I had read a story where African Americans were in love. Usually you read stories about African Americans struggling and in poverty, and all those things are true, but this book seemed like a guide to love.

"I work with the Third Street Youth Center and Clinic with children that are at risk, and there's something about working with teenagers and seeing them in love that made me think of this book again."

Like Hurston's protagonist, Janie, Simpson is of mixed ethnic background. Her mother is Filipina, while her African American father was born in Cleveland. As a child, she remembers encountering racism in Texas before the family finally settled in San Jose, and the migratory

threads of Janie's life as she attempted to unlock the secret to finding herself also rang true to Simpson.

"As a child, going from an all-African American neighborhood to white suburban neighborhood in the South was difficult," she says. "I have memories of a friend's mom who made her tell me I couldn't play with her anymore. Those experiences as a child are part of the social structures that I look at now as an artist. My work has a lot of social commentary because I find that my life is a social commentary."



Smeeta Manhati

Choreographer Raissa Simpson, Push Dance Company.