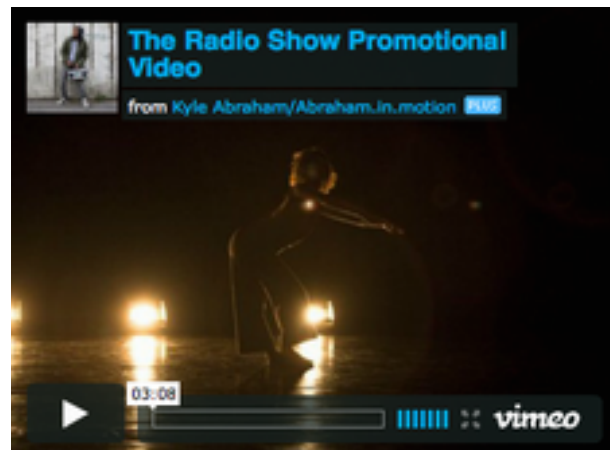


# Black Choreographers Festival

by Becca Klarin

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The seventh annual Black Choreographers Festival (BCF) began last week. A three-weekend festival, its goal is to increase the visibility of African and African American artists. The festival includes two more weekends, both of which are housed in San Francisco (the first weekend was held in Oakland). This coming weekend's performances at ODC Theater include eight experienced choreographers/companies from around the globe, including Kyle Abraham, DawsonDance SF, Portsha Jefferson, Push Dance Company, Dimensions Dance Theater, Alayo Dance Company, and Chloe Arnold. Next weekend includes up-and-coming choreographers, who will perform at Dance Mission. In addition, each weekend also includes a free short film series.



Raissa Simpson, artistic director of Push Dance Company, is featured on Program A of this weekend's performances (titled "A Home Coming"). Simpson told me a little about her background and experience with the festival.

**Becca Klarin: You grew up in San Jose, but went away for college. What brought you back here?**

Raissa Simpson: Yes, it's true, I was finishing my studies in New York when I left to visit family in San Jose just 10 days before September 11, 2001 and this nation's greatest tragedy. Looking back, I am blessed because dancing and creating work here in San Francisco has been enjoyable.

**Tell me a little about your company.**

Push Dance Company really refuses to be categorized. From mixed-media and aerial flying to hip hop operas, Push puts together dances that we feel



are intriguing and exciting to watch. The company explores mixed race, identity, and the affects of contemporary issues through dance.

I am Filipino and African-American and when I get into the studio with my dancers, we research our own personal histories and historical events to see how it all fits together.

**I've read that you "dance[s] big"-- would you elaborate on your movement style?**

When I launched my dance company, I put together different threads of my classical/contemporary dance background into the freedom of a structured improv. I played piano as a child and I feel strongly about the emotionality in music in contrast to just counting notes.

I am inspired by the hip hop gamut and can easily cross-pollinate those rhythms with multiple-dance disciplines. Plus, I'm a tiny lady (at 5 foot 3 inches) so, when I dance... I want the world to see me.

**Have you been involved in BCF in the past? And what's your involvement in BCF been like this year?**

When I first started with BCF it was as a dancer with Robert Moses' Kin and the following year or two as a part of the Artists in Mentorship Program where I got my first review. This year, I'll be a part of two weekends of BCF for the first time. I am excited to debut a company work, "Black Swordsman Saga" which is a hip hop opera that will also tour back to New York this year.

**What do you think makes BCF unique?**

Over the past seven years, BCF has featured some of the most exciting choreographers--all different in their own right. If attending a performance you can see classical, traditional, and edgy artists like myself. I always enjoy showcasing my work and seeing what other choreographers are doing.

**Your company has formed a partnership with the 3rd St Youth Center & Clinicdown in the Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood. Would you tell me more about that work?**

[We] will work with ten youth performers ages 12-21 and our professional artists to present our home season, "Mixed Messages," at Museum of African Diaspora in downtown San Francisco. It is inspired by stories in our film sound score from mixed-race individuals who live and work in San Francisco. "Mixed Messages" is set to premiere May 21-29.