



# Kinetic changes

Raissa Simpson's Push Dance Company grapples with *Mixed Messages* through movement

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[arts@sfbg.com](mailto:arts@sfbg.com)



Push Dance Company includes dancers from 3rd Street Youth Center and Clinic.  
PHOTO BY RAISSA SIMPSON

In 1810, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans were divided between white and black (free and slave). In 1910 "mulatto" and "other" were added. Last year's respondents had the choice among 15 racial categories, in addition to a space for ones not listed. Assigning people to predetermined slots is becoming so complicated — and controversial — that it's hard not to wonder what the census form will look like in 2050 when more than 50 percent of the population will be "mixed." It's a question that Raissa Simpson grapples with in her new dance installation piece *Mixed Messages*, running at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (May 21-28). Choreographed for the six dancers of her Push Dance Company and youngsters from the 3rd Street Youth Center and Clinic and beyond, the work uses a sound score by El Kool Kyle that includes comments from multiracial people who face the perennial question, from others and from within themselves, "What are you?"

Simpson is comfortable with multiple identities: ballet, jazz, hip-hop, modern. "For a while, I was greedy — I wanted it all," she says. At home she grew up eating Filipino food but once she went to college, she took "a lot of African American history and identity classes." Among her friends, "mixed" is what she calls a form of "friendly street-slang" in the sense of "Oh, you are mixed. I am a ... " Part of the inspiration for *Messages* came from a comedy act in which the performers talked about their multiracial heritage. "It was hilarious and absurd," she remembers. "Everyone started with, 'Guess what I am?' "

Yet when she began to explore the subject, she found a lot of resistance from people who didn't want to talk about it. It simply was too painful. For many, the word "mixed" still resonates with violence, pain, and something forced on them and their ancestors. Being defined — often by what is still the dominant culture — simply by the way they look, infuriates others. Some also consider multiple backgrounds a loss of cultural identity and pressure to choose one over the other. Simpson insists that "it doesn't have to be that way."

As a choreographer, Simpson developed her voice locally by dancing with Robert Moses' Kin and Joanna Haigood's Zaccho Dance Theatre, two companies that couldn't be more different from each other. Her five years with Moses, she says, taught her a strong work ethic as well as "the possibilities of movement and how to build a work." From Haigood, with whom she still performs, she learned "to go deep into a subject matter. Diving into something helped me edit myself as an artist."

But she has not finished learning from others. During her 2010 Chime fellowship — the Margaret Jenkins mentorship program that pairs younger dancers with more experienced choreographers — she worked with choreographer and cofounder of the WestWave Dance Festival Cathleen McCarthy, also a graduate of the SUNY Purchase dance department. Choreographing her hip-hop opera, *Black Swordsman Saga*, Simpson credits McCarthy with "knowing

how to tell a story" and "how to bring out hidden mysteries and emotions."

As a dancer, Simpson is still fearless and fierce, the kind of performer who is unstoppable. Her 2008 whirlwind solo, the appropriately named *Judgment in Milliseconds*, performed in a straight-hair and Afro wig, thrives on split-second emotional and kinetic changes. Most recently, Simpson danced in Haigood's *The Monkey and the Devil*, as painful a work about the soul-destroying effect of racism that I have seen. "In order to perform hate, you first have to be friends," Simpson explains about the difficulties of performing such unremittingly antagonistic choreography.

Watching this dynamo in rehearsal is a surprise. Soft-spoken, calm, and focused, at times she seems almost reticent, perhaps thinking aloud. As she demonstrates an across-the-stage sequence, she tells the dancers exactly what she wants even as she encourages them to find their own way through the phrasing. At one point, she asks for more articulated details that have to run current-like through the whole body. "I am a quiet person," she tells them, "but I like loud dancers."