



Joanna Haigood's Zaccho Dance Theatre's

'Between me and the other world'

December 1, 2013

Review by Wanda Sabir

With the close of the year drawing near, I'd like to reflect on the thematic nuances seen this fall season regarding Blackness, its connotation a tension which never quite seems to disappear or go away. Joanna Haigood's Zaccho Dance Company's new work, which premiered Nov. 1-3, "Between me and the other world: An exploration of W.E.B. DuBois's concept of 'Double Consciousness,'" Camille A. Brown and dancers' "Mr. TOL E. RAnCE" and Margo Hall's very personal "BeBop Baby: A Musical Memoir" all entertain this theme, the dilemma of Blackness in a 21st century America.



In "Between me and the other world," Rashidi Omari is caged while in the video behind him, Kenneth Harding, 19, bleeds to death after being shot by police when he couldn't produce a transfer to prove he'd paid his \$2 Muni fare – the scene of that crime only about a mile from the Zaccho studio. – Photo: Piro Patton

While this review speaks specifically to Haigood's work, I thought it worth mentioning that she is not alone in this contemplation (smile). How the three artists look at the theme produces strikingly different

work – Hall’s and Haigood’s a bit more polished and complete than Brown’s, which is a work in progress.

That we are still having this conversation in 2013 is very disturbing. Is it a result of the homogenized American persona shipped and marketed worldwide yet indigestible at home, or is the fact that there remains an intolerance for Blackness at the start of the new millennium that corners Black boys on deserted streets eating Skittles, at service stations pumping gas and at convenience stores whistling, and kills them both literally and emotionally, psychologically and spiritually? Fifty-eight years after Emmett Till was dragged from the river, his body mangled and mutilated beyond recognition, Black boys are still lynched by educators who equate intelligence with hair styles and clothing choices, diction and zip codes.

I was armed when I entered the darkened studio room on Yosemite in San Francisco’s Bayview District where Zaccho Dance Theatre resides. When I opened the black curtain and stepped into the darkened room, I stood still for a moment to let my eyes adjust and noticed chairs where a few patrons sat. I decided to wander through the huge open space, at its center screened partitions which reminded me of gallery sets, meditation rooms or moments in history colliding as the transparency offered no real separation acoustically or visually.



As Matthew Wickett runs, Jetta Martin screams as Rashidi Omari dies in “Between me and the other world.” – Photo: Piro Patton

David Szlasa, media artist responsible for the lighting design, coupled with Sean Riley’s set against a musical landscape only someone of Anthony Brown’s compositional understanding of the material – as lived experience – could explore, guests stood and reflected as our eyes adjusted to the room. At any time there were projections, video and still, on the screens, which were moved by the four performers to form flat and open spaces which they then occupied.

“Raissa Simpson, Matthew Wickett, Rashidi Omari, Jetta Martin,” according to Haigood, are “all fantastic performers who are investigating these issues in their work beyond this one.” All of them have been seen in other work, most notably, Simpson and Wickett in Haigood’s “The Monkey and the Devil” and Martin, Simpson and Wickett in “Sailing Away.”

I wasn’t able to interpret or unpack all the imagery; however, Anthony Brown’s score offered comforting familiarity, as did the choreography, which was vivid and quite accessible, drawing in the audience at times even inviting participation as the cast shook hands and said: “Only a man who knows what it is like to be defeated can reach down to the bottom of his soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win. I’m not the greatest; I’m the double greatest” (Muhammed Ali).

Fifty-eight years after Emmett Till was dragged from the river, his body mangled and mutilated beyond recognition, Black boys are still lynched by educators who equate intelligence with hair styles and clothing choices, diction and zip codes.

Is this a subtle hint at our greatness as a people? Is it a sign of greatness to be the brunt of every atrocity invented and then some? Maybe greatness is not all it is chalked up to be? Our collective racial psychosis connected to Blackness points to the difficulty and burden of this “greatness.”



In “Between me and the other world,” Raissa Simpson and Matthew Wickett dance as Jetta Martin walks in the background. – Photo: Piro Patton

Collapsing and opening space, turning lights on and off, risers stacked and unstacked, bodies loaded, emptied and trapped via incarceration in Black skin, bound, unable to move. The vision of a Black man running stayed with me. It is the image on the movie poster for Solomon Northup’s “12 Years a Slave.” It is the image of my nephew Obataiya Tamirr Lewis Edwards shot by Oakland police, like Kenneth Harding, whose cinema verité execution is included in the work, along with the security camera video of Trayvon Martin making his final purchase (in this life).

The video is not always clear, but the interpretive choreography where worlds shrink and disappear as the Negro is erased and his or her persona is made unacceptable within the narrow confines of definitions and recast assignments. In Haigood’s work, the manipulated public spaces no longer

accommodate our collective presence since our usefulness is past. “How does it feel to be a problem?” we are asked.

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The shifting energy which opens the work – ebullient, light, filled with laughter as the dancer (alternating Raissa Simpson and Matthew Wickett) enjoys the sensuousness of her body moving alone and with her man. Oblivious to the shrinking universe, all of a sudden she looks up and her world is not as open – the stars have disappeared. What was initially welcoming and inviting is gone – to her credit she keeps dancing, Duke Ellington’s “Mount Harissa” arranged and performed by Anthony Brown’s Asian American Orchestra, a literal soundtrack.



At a conference called “Healing through Community Change: Families Taking Action” at Allen Temple on Nov. 18, Wanda Johnson, mother of Oscar Grant (center), talks with Airicka Gordon-Taylor and Ollie Gordon, Emmett Till family representatives and founders of the Mamie Till Mobley Memorial Foundation. – Photo: Wanda Sabir

What happened? One can see the dancer puzzling as the walls continue to cut her off from the rest of her social network until she is all alone, trapped with no place to go. “I AM” shifts into “AM I?”

Where there is no reinforcement, does one cease to exist? Diane Taylor calls this “percepticide” in her study of the U.S.-backed 14-year military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) (Lorenz, Watkins). When a situation is repressive, that is “people perceive atrocities and injustices, often they must actually renounce their own perception to avoid danger to themselves. ... This renunciation, according to Taylor, ‘turns the violence on oneself. Percepticide blinds, maims, kills through the senses’” (Taylor, 1997, p. 124).

“When whole populations are forced to not-know what is going on around them, when the media chooses to not-name injustice, watching-without-seeing becomes ‘the most dehumanizing of acts.’ This renunciation establishes a split within the self, where certain kinds of knowings are exiled and unavailable for negotiation of one’s life” (Lorenz, Watkins).

If one is a part of an institution where one’s presence is not validated, that is, no one says, I see you, does that make one question one’s validity and try to become like the other so that one’s credibility is then reinforced? Here is where “Double Consciousness” develops to Brown’s original score by the same title.

While Raissa and Matthew dance, another man stands outside. Jetta is on the other side of the screen facing him. Suddenly there is only one dancer – one man following his inner light. His space shrinks. It feels suddenly claustrophobic. He is trapped, caged. His woman on the other side of a wall.

He joins her and others at the stake, on the auction block.



Describing this scene, Wanda writes: “(T)he four dancers stand in a linear tower ending with the two men. Perhaps because of their vulnerability or visibility, they are taken first.” The four dancers in “Between me and the other world” are Rashidi Omari, Matthew Wickett, Jetta Martin and Raissa Simpson. – Photo: Piro Patton

DuBois writes in the program: “This sense is [one] of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. ... [These] two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

The choreography here is stunning as the four dancers stand in a linear tower ending with the two men. Perhaps because of their vulnerability or visibility, they are taken first. I thought as Jetta comforts the dead man, how Black women continue to shed too many tears.

“Am I” – shadows, reflections – dehumanized, sold, robbed of soul. The four dancers stand on risers, shadowing each other’s gestures – supplicating, genuflecting – hands outstretched, wiping forehead, wiping off contamination, breaking bonds, the movement from pride to despair – they choke on something bitter, then try to pull it out of their mouths. Is it a word? Are they trying to speak something into reality only to see it dissipate?

The men look at their skin as if they have never seen such before. “Bid ‘em in, bid ‘em in” – red light. The space shrinks. I hear cymbals – abstract discordant sound.

“The Veil” – Jetta solos – a Black man dies. The other dancer takes off his shirt and runs. An image of a Black man is projected on the screen in front, behind him. It embraces his energy as he runs. A Black man running. Why are Black men always being hunted – shot? Can’t outrun a bullet.

Jetta screams. There is a historic link to the present. Rashidi is hunted; he’s trapped by time, by history. Is it karma that he ends up in a cage, body riddled with bullets?



Cephus Johnson, Oscar Grant’s Uncle Bobby, and Marcel Jones, UC Berkeley Black Student Union president, participated in “Healing through Community Change: Families Taking Action” at Allen Temple on Nov. 18. – Photo: Wanda Sabir

I recall this moment once again as I reflect on the program at Allen Temple’s “Healing through Community Change: Families Taking Action” on Nov. 18, which featured the mothers of Oscar Grant and Alan Dwayne Blueford with special guests, representatives of the Mamie Till Mobley Memorial Foundation from Chicago, mother and daughter team, Executive Director Airickca Gordon Taylor and

Social Justice Coordinator Ollie Gordon, who spoke about their cousin Emmett Till and his maverick mom, Mrs. Till-Mobley.

Also featured were forum organizer Marcel Jones, UC Berkeley Black Student Union, labor leader Clarence Thomas, civil rights attorney Walter Riley, Minister Keith Muhammad, who laid out the strategy used to galvanize citizens, clergy and politicians around the Oscar Grant murder case. Jack Bryson was co-emcee.

In “Between me,” families are separated on the canvas. A Black man (Omari) remains caged and cut off, until another Black man (Wickett) frees him. The links between the present where such inheritance nests beneath and beyond psychological reach are addressed in Part 3, “The Veil.”

Haigood’s ability to visually and tactilely express such a complex philosophical and political concept as DuBois poses is brilliant. Even if one is unable to immediately articulate what she experienced in “Between me and the other world,” one would be moved wordlessly into some conscious or unconscious act of defiance or resistance, especially those self-identified, connected to or perhaps disconnected from the Black bodies on stage.



Jeralynn Blueford, mother of Alan Blueford, another victim of police murder in Oakland, speaks at “Healing through Community Change: Families Taking Action” at Allen Temple on Nov. 18. – Photo: Wanda Sabir

The visceral impact of the work up to its finale, “Sorrow Song,” grew steadily more intense. I stayed for two and half cycles and could not stay for a fourth. Perhaps because I knew the joy experienced in the opening dance scene was short-lived. Perhaps because I knew the running man would get caught. Perhaps because I knew the police responsible for Harding’s death would not be charged or arrested. Perhaps because I already knew the collective historic and present outcome, I could not stand to see the reigns tightened around the dancer’s neck until he was immobile.

“Between me and the other world” is tragic. The end, “Sorrow Song,” mourns the historic and present deaths. It offers no solution and ends in a question: “Lord how come me here? I wish I never was born.” For what purpose were my ancestors brought to this land – not the economic reasoning Western Europeans used to justify the Trade, rather the spiritual necessity for the world community that benefited from our ancestors’ capture? Was I to reap no benefit, ever?



At “Healing through Community Change: Families Taking Action” at Allen Temple on Nov. 18, Clarence Thomas of the ILWU and the Million Workers March Movement stands behind emcee Jack Bryson. – Photo: Wanda Sabir

Raissa dances in the shadows. Split or disassociated, each member of the community finds him and herself alone, yet not always forgotten as in the case with Rashidi. Perhaps each man reflects the duality of this split, each woman the same, a state easier to maintain if one stays away from his or her mirrored or externalized self.

It’s too bad there were no conversations built into such a powerful work. It isn’t safe to lift the veil on a consciousness asleep for so long without a cautionary breathalyzer test (smile). My favorite musical moments besides the opening “I Am” with Duke Ellington, is “The Veil” with an original score and the voices of the Baka or People of the Forest in Central Africa.

I was pleasantly reminded of a talk with Malonga Casquelorde when Alonzo King’s “Forest People” opened in San Francisco. He told me about their traditions and explained some of the choreography I witnessed on stage that evening. Funny how in the midst of losing consciousness or awareness of self, I remembered myself (smile).

Pre-show interview with Joanna Haigood

In a pre-show interview, Joanna Haigood, a recent Bessie awardee, graciously answered a few questions, two are highlighted here.

Wanda Sabir: Your body of work speaks to what it means to be a product of this nation. Race is a concept one cannot skirt or escape here, so that you would once again tackle this theme is not a surprise. How did your evolution thematically land here right now with “The Souls of Black Folk”? I read that the work actually started 17 years ago, but as it lay in the cuts as if it were baking or on simmer, why now?

Joanna Haigood: I was approached by a friend a few years ago who was working with a presenter in Great Barrington, Mass., the town where DuBois grew up, and was asked if I would be interested in creating a piece based on DuBois’ life. I had spent a considerable amount of time in that area while

researching “Invisible Wings,” a work based on the Underground Railroad, and had come across some of DuBois’ papers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This was in the mid-1990s.

Before that time, I was not really familiar with his work and was struck by his brilliant intellect, his passion, his unwavering commitment to the cause of African Americans, and the relevance of his work today. After this invitation, I read “The Souls of Black Folk” and became interested in his notion of “double consciousness” and “the veil.” He says, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” We, as people of color, continue to struggle with this duality.

Our country is plagued by racism, evidenced in our education and justice systems, in the lack of economic opportunities or advancements. Being Black is still synonymous with being poor, ignorant and dangerous. This sounds ridiculous, but it is true. Our young people are being gunned down for no other reason than for being Black and “suspicious.” The horrific lynching of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, was not that long ago. I think that the effects of slavery and the strategies that supported it have yet to be healed or eradicated. It is important to recognize it; if we don’t, we will never move forward.

I also believe that we are still undermined by our own self-doubts. DuBois speaks about this: “But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate. Whisperings and portents came home upon the four winds: Lo! we are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts.”

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Wanda Sabir: As a woman with distinct duality in her person, biracial identity, does the two-ness resonate for you in a more heightened way? What about DuBois’ work spoke to you initially that still resonates for you now?

Joanna Haigood: I am bi-racial and bi-cultural. My mother is German and met my father in her hometown, Kitzingen, just after the war. Growing up in the ‘60s in the U.S., there were many issues related to my family background that created complicated and compromising situations. My parents were well aware of the dangers we faced and worked very hard to keep us protected.

“But being bi-racial was never my reality when I stepped out the door; I was always Black. It was a time when there was only one box to check. This was confusing, particularly when I was very young, but eventually I just dealt with it. So, yes, I think there is a heightened sense of this “two-ness” for me.

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