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DANCE REVIEW

## Honoring the Vital Rhythms And the Masters of the Past

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Past and present danced together on Thursday night at the BAM Harvey Theater when 651 Arts offered the first in a series of programs called Black Dance: Tradition and Transformation.

Under the direction of Maurine D. Knighton, 651 Arts has been a major presenter of African-American dance, theater and music since its founding in 1988. The program on Thursday was a fine example of how the organization honors the traditions of black dance and encourages new works.

Much of the evening was devoted to tributes. But they were far from stuffy. The audience got a four-minute peep at scenes from "Free to Dance!," a three-hour television documentary on the history of black dance, produced and directed by Madison D. Lacy, that is to be broadcast in April as part of the "Dance in America" series on PBS.

One of the dancers who was briefly glimpsed in these excerpts was Katherine Dunham, a vibrant performer and a choreographer who combined anthropological research with show-business flair in many internationally successful dance revues of the 1940's and 50's. A Katherine Dunham Legacy Award has been established by 651 Arts, and its first recipient will be Ms. Dunham herself. The presentation takes place next Saturday at the Harvey Theater at 6 p.m.

The bits from this television documentary provided a tantalizing preview. But the main attractions onstage were works by Forces of Nature Dance Theater Company, whose director and choreographer is Abdel R. Salaam. In keeping with the spirit of the 651 Arts series, Mr. Salaam devoted himself to tradition and transformation with equal fervor.

His world premiere, "Rhythm Legacy: The Living Books," was a panoramic view of African and African-American dance history set to an accompaniment devised by Michael Wimberly and Mr. Salaam that combined taped sounds with live music and a text by Jasiri Kafele.

In a whirlwind tour through time and space, Ms. Salaam choreographically evoked an African forest as well as several American dance forms ranging from the cakewalk to the jitterbug. He brought the action up to date in scenes in which he juxtaposed the stiffness of people crowded together on the subway during the day with exuberant examples of the way people can cut loose at late-night dance clubs.

"Rhythm Legacy" was deliberately impressionistic in its approach to history; styles and eras zipped almost breathlessly by. But to quote a phrase from the text, the spectacle was an always exciting reminder of how, in art and life, "the heartbeat sets the pace."

Mr. Salaam honored specific dancers in "Generations!" The presentation contrasted film clips or slides of important black dancers and choreographers with appearances onstage by these artists. Some struck poses. Others did a step or two. They all looked happy. And the audience happily cheered the dancers Mr. Salaam honored: Eleo Pomare, Louis Johnson, Lorreta Abbot, Rod Rodgers, George Faison, Dianne McIntyre, Joan Miller, Gus Solomons Jr., Dyane Harvey, Martial Roumain, Marlies Yearby, Bebe Miller, Fred Benjamin and Sarita Allen.

Mr. Salaam's company also danced "Terrestrial Wombs," a choreographic ode to the spirits of creation in which Dina Lynn Wright portrayed an imposing earth mother.

Events in the Black Dance series are to continue through next Saturday at the Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Photo: Members of Forces of Nature dance "Rhythm Legacy." (Justin Lane for The New York Times)