



Walter's World: Abdel Salaam- A Force of Nature

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By Walter Rutledge



The great dancer and groundbreaking choreographer Martha Graham said, "It takes ten years to make a mature dancer". Nikita Talin of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo added "And twenty to make a choreographer." At first glance this statement may seem extreme, considering our present environment of immediate gratification. To become a true master craftsmen (or craftswomen) it takes diligence and years of commitment and exploration. When you have the opportunity to see the work of an artist who has achieved such a lofty goal it is extremely rewarding and almost spiritual.

Saturday, April 10th we experienced such an event at Aaron Davis Hall when Forces of Nature presented "*Stories...*" of *Darkness and Lightness of Being*. Choreographer Abdel, Salaam the force behind Forces of Nature, presented an ambitious evening of five works. The evening is best described as atmospheric, with a strong use of theatre. Lighting, live music, and minimal sets were support elements that enhanced the sensory experience without overpowering.

Speaking in a strong choreographic voice Mr. Salaam utilized a rich and diverse movement palette. The works were social commentary on the environment, the human spirit, and the elements. More importantly the concert itself created it's own environment, it was literally the world according to Abdel.

The program opened with *AXIS: Temple of Ice*. It was homage to the "elemental powers of snow and ice in their roles as protectors of the planet". The work was designed around a series of ramps and platforms positioned at different angles. Dancers moved, slid, rested and posed on the set. The juxtaposition of large group movement and plastique was very visually satisfying and artistically effective.

B FLOWIN B SMOOVE was a lesson in the fact that dance springs eternal. It demonstrated the correlation between West African dance, vernacular dance of the twenties and thirties (Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker) and the present dances performed by today's youth. In pure movement without overt, commercial or stereotypical depictions we could see generations past and present encapsulated in the same movement. Abdel's opening solo brought to mind many images from the mythical Damballah, to Earl Tucker, even Michael Jackson was channeled; it was danced with great aplomb and was clearly an audience favorite.

Tock Sick... The Healing Winds is a solo performed by featured guest artist Nathan Trice. A statement on pollution the work was art as both a construct and destruct. Mr. Trice emerges from a large vat covered in brown paint and literally hurls himself repeatedly against a blank white surface leaving several impressions of his form. Eventually Mr. Trice destroys the Jackson Pollock-que image before exiting the stage. Described by Mr. Salaam as one of his artistic muses Mr. Trice attacked this role with focus and considerable stage presence



A Question in Modesty and *APC* were both works intended to make social statements with religious overtones. *A Question of Modesty* transports use to a small West African village in the era of the middle passage, here Christian and Islamic beliefs permeate the community. In the end the lines blur and there are more similarities than differences. The work featured live music performed by Mr. Salaam, Raymond Graham, Kojo Johnson Frank Malloy, Frank Malloy Jr., and Michael Wimberly.



APC, a work in progress, addressed social taboos, religious hypocrisy and prejudice. The work was dedicated to victims of oppression and violence do to their sexual orientation. A striking image was a religious figure portrayed by Watkins Smith standing upstage with three couples standing downstage stage left, right and center in a “t” shape light pattern symbolic of the transept, crossing and apse of a cathedral.

In all of the group works Mr. Salaam displayed great prowess. He showed us unison goes not have to mean everyone doing the same movement at the same time. The stage was always well balanced, without being equally divided as two halves left and right of center and when it was linear it was never flat. There was an Alexander Calder like symmetry that resisted convention. These are all the attributes of an experienced craftsman who has cultivated a rich and expansive vocabulary.

My only regret was the night I attended *The Life and Legend of Marie Laveau* was not performed. Dyanne Harvey, the wife and another muse of Mr. Salaam, has always been one of favorite performers. The company will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary in 2011, a major accomplishment for any arts organization. We commend Mr. Salaam for his continued commitment to his craft. We know he will remain a force to be reckoned with.

In Photos: 1) Dyanne Harvey 2) Nathan Trice in *Tock Sick** 3) Ensemble in *APC**

* photo by Erin Baiano