

The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica's *50th Anniversary Season*

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Jamaican dance theatre audiences love a story. The National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) of Jamaica's 50th Anniversary Season staged an encounter with the country's living history. NDTC's re-telling of Jamaica's embodied and written histories through live dance performance cultivates a sense of presence that transforms the past into a living present. Rex Nettleford's *The Crossing* (1978) tells of the Middle Passage and the losses experienced across the Atlantic African Diaspora while *Kumina* (1971) and *Gerrehbenta* (1983), two of his ritual works, theatricalize Jamaican practices of faith that were crucial acts of survival in a new land. Burt Rose's *Edna M* (1987) and Clive Thompson's Bob Marley tribute *Ode* (2005) celebrate Jamaica's national heroes. Two works by Cuban choreographers, Eduardo Rivero-Walker's *Súlkari* (1971) and Ramon Ramos Alayo's *Siempre Corriendo* (2012) speak to Jamaica's place in the Greater Caribbean and its ongoing artistic dialogue with Cuba. Marlon Simm's *Chromozome X* (2012) reflects on female athleticism, and was likely inspired by Jamaica's anticipated performance at the summer Olympics. To re-tell these stories to Jamaicans at home and across the diaspora, NDTC's 50th Anniversary Season opened in March with performances at the Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts in New York, USA, continued with the annual Easter Morning of Movement performance and the three-week concert run in July at The Little Theatre in Kingston, Jamaica, and concluded with performances in September at Fairfield Hall in London, UK.



Rex Nettleford's *Kumina*. National Dance Theatre Company dancers. July 2012, Little Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica.

Photo: Tony wong

It was both artistic and political motives that inspired the late Rex Nettleford and Eddie Thomas (who left the company in the late 1960s) to found a *national* company in 1962, the year of Jamaica's independence. Following the pioneering efforts of Trinidadian Beryl McBurnie and Jamaican Ivy Baxter, NDTC choreographers and dancers set out to develop a movement vocabulary and a repertoire that investigates and preserves

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movement patterns and embodied cultural practices native to Jamaica and the Caribbean. Dance theatre was among the most appropriate representational tools to promote a post-colonial Caribbean culture and its development—as Nettleford writes in *Dance Jamaica*, dance has been and always will be “a primary instrument of survival.” Dancing bodies not only link the African diaspora to ancestral traditions by communicating physical memories and unspoken knowledge, but also stand as a reminder that “one’s body belongs to oneself, despite the laws governing chattel slavery in the English-speaking Caribbean, which until 1834 allowed one person to be the ‘property’ of another” (1985:20). Now under the artistic direction of Barry Moncrieffe, NDTC continues to use movement and song to re-play and re-present Jamaican cultural and artistic expression.

NDTC’s signature piece, *Kumina*, appeared in its usual place as the finale on many performance programs. Though based upon the Congo-derived ritual practiced in St. Thomas Parish, Nettleford’s *Kumina* is committed to ethnographic *inaccuracy*. Departing from the circular patterns of the kumina ritual, the piece is oriented to a proscenium and is intended for an audience seeking entertainment rather than engagement with the spirit world. A drum break initiates the performance, and this call is met first by the NDTC singers, led by music director Marjorie Wylie, who establish a rolling incantation—*Who cross the river ... I want to know, I want to know ... Only the righteous, righteous, fo sho’*—and then by the Kumina King, who offers a libation of white rum. Dancers enter from all directions in polyrhythmic progressions. With hearts lifted and arms hanging, elbows curved back, they are propelled forward in a hip-saw toe-inching shuffle, a movement characterized by crawling feet and the sustained forward-back contraction-release of the pelvis. A stick-fighting interlude disrupts the rite; this is theatre, not ritual, audiences are not to be inhabited by the spirits of the dead. The onstage rapture continues as the Kumina Queen drives her flat-footed extensions into the earth. Individual dancers sweep across the stage, crashing into improvised raptures. The polyphony of drums, voices, and bodies reaches a near frenzy, with spectators, bobbing in their seats, equally compelled by the spirit of this ancestral movement.

The postures and steps of works like *Kumina* are the foundations of the NDTC technique, which also draws from modern dance and ballet. By codifying Jamaican ways of movement into a technique—or “system,” as company



Eduardo Rivero-Walker’s *Súlkari*. (l-r) Marisa Benain, Orlando Barnett, Keita-Marie

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Chamberlain, Allatunje Connell. July 2012, Little Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica.

Photo: Tony wong

dancers and students at the Edna Manley School of the Visual and Performing Arts refer to it— they institutionalized a language of representation for memories passed down through bodies. The creation of a repertoire based on this language gave aesthetic weight, moral purpose, kinetic logic, and discipline to movements that were considered unruly, unseemly, and even ungodly—not only by 19th-century imperial eyes, but also by the mid-20th-century still-colonial-minded Caribbean middle-classes. Dancers had to learn to embody and to communicate through this language, but audiences, too, had to learn to appreciate these transmissions as their unique cultural inheritance and identity. Such ritual works attest to NDTC's success in preserving movement patterns that might otherwise be unclaimed or lost—but what caught my attention this season were the ways in which re-mounted works were animations of the archive.

Burt Rose's *Edna M.*, celebrates the artistic vision and political voice of Edna Manley, a sculptor known as the “Mother of Jamaican Arts,” as well as the wife of one of the country's greatest statesman, Norman Manley, and the mother of another, Michael Manley. The work opens as Edna, performed this season by Kerry-Ann Henry, with a special performance of the title role by retired dancer Melanie Graham, is visited by a muse, a statuesque masculine form, who ignites her aesthetic sensibilities and her passion for the visual arts. He accompanies her as she falls in love and enters the Manley world of politics, as she stands with the country's women against colonialism and patriarchy, and as she comes to know Jamaica and Jamaicans ways of being. The final scene depicts her inspired, rendering her visions in wood. Her sculptures—by far the company's best forms—come to life.

Edna Manley's story is documented in the archive. There are books about her roles as wife, mother, artist, and advocate. Edna's sculptures are public domain; *Negro Aroused*, in fact, is a prominently placed public artwork. If Edna M. and her legacy are already a matter of record, why then interpret and re-present this narrative through dance, a form that ostensibly runs the risk of disappearance? Making the spectre of this national hero re-appear across the live body of a dancer facilitates for audiences a dramatized, but live encounter with the past.

Eduardo Rivero-Walker's *Súlkari*—by far the most stunning and precise piece performed on the program—might be read as homage to African movement, but is similarly invested in the materiality of an archive. Choreographed in 1971 for Cuba's Conjunto Nacional de Danza Contemporania and passed on to NDTC in 1980 as part of a cultural exchange, *Súlkari* abstracts African sculpture for the stage in order to reflect on the active, *living* process of making art. Set to Rivero-Walker's own arrangement of Afro-Cuban drumming and Yoruba chant, three pairs of bodies move through contrasting, yet complimentary gestures of primordial

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coupling. The choreography periodically arrests their movement in poses. These poses are citational in that they capture the stasis of the artifact. These pre-animations and re-animations of an artifact allow audiences to consider both the originating action/gesture captured in the sculpture and the continuation of that movement in present time. This year, Rivero-Walker came from Cuba (where he is the Artistic Director of the Compañía del Caribe Nacional de Santiago) to re-mount the work on a new generation of NDTC bodies. He even brought one of his company's drummers, Deury Cisneros Marzal, to lead the NDTC musicians and singers in the precise rhythms that call and respond to these bodies in motion.



Eduardo Rivero-Walker's Súl kari. Candice Morris and Marlon Simms. July 2012, Little Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica.

Photo: Tony wong

The accelerated, at times even anxious, timbre of the choreography and music in the works that premiered this season suggests to me the patterned movements of an increasingly globalized and technologized society. Ramon Ramos Alayo's *Siempre Corriendo*, a special commission funded by NDTC Alumni and Friends, USA, featuring guest artists Edisnel Rodríguez and Delvis Savigne Friñón of Rivero-Walker's company and NDTC's Marlon Simms and Mark Phinn, explores the potency of Caribbean masculinity. The first two episodes establish a language of centeredness, while simultaneously performing falls, rolls, and gravity defying jumps. The contact choreography of the third episode gives form to the cooperative and collaborative dialogue between Cuban and Jamaican dance theatre and to the unity of Caribbean minds, bodies, and spirits despite political and linguistic differences.

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Marlin Simms' *Chromosome X* sustains the momentum and theme of *Siempre Corriendo* by populating the stage with 16 female dancers who sprint resolutely through various intersections and interludes. This spectacular physicality rendered a prescient image of the success enjoyed by Jamaica's female athletes on the 2012 Olympic world stage. The works premiered this 50th Anniversary Season show the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica's commitment to retaining its "Caribbeanness" even as its choreographers experiment with an increasingly modern(ized) dance vernacular.

Lara Cahill-Booth received her PhD from the English Department at the University of Miami. Her research uses performance studies and environmental studies to examine the mythopoetics of place in Caribbean literature and performing arts. Her work has appeared in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* and the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. "Re-membling the Tribe: Networks of Recovery in Rex Nettleford's *Katrina*," an article based upon her ongoing NDTTC research, appears in *TDR/The Drama Review*. She is currently a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Miami.

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