

The scales of memory



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Scales of Memory was performed by Senegal's Compagnie Jant-Bi and the Brooklyn Urban Bush Women. Choreographed by Germaine Acogny and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, it highlights the African people's identity, cultural heritage and how they are continuously finding themselves through the African Diaspora all over the world. The performance focuses on the acceptance of the history and heritage of all blacks worldwide to be able to live unhindered and progressively in the present. Scales of Memory is not for the faint of heart.

Their struggles in the past until their current disposition, serving as an inspiration to all who are still chained and shackled in the vicious cycle of being unable to live their dreams due to oppression and discrimination. This masterpiece is the convergence of African and American history both in execution of the theme and the historical premise which the work is based upon. The performance is riveted with emotion and captivates its audiences, whether they are cultural connoisseurs or the common entertainment seekers.

As silhouettes move across the stage amidst the pale background in slow motion, one can see the transition of movements flow gracefully from the dancers with power as subtle as the deep currents of the river. The dancers then begin to introduce themselves and their lineage in their own native tongues, prompting the audience with what's to come. The dancers exhibit unforgiving, raw, explosive power in most of their movements, though never without the gracefulness and control that defines contemporary dance.

Other movements exhibit the sensuality and subtle command of movement that draws the eye captive to the dancer/s. Extending the usual

contemporary dance is the African brand of dance involving body musicality, using the stage, their hands and feet as they dance to create a rhythmic percussion that is central to the musical effect of the performance. The movement of each and every person across the stage encompasses every line of vision that there is no movement left unseen as if they are under a magnifying glass to each and every viewer.

This is true whether they be wild bodily movements as if they are a group of wild animals trapped in a cage, or subtle movements of one man held in one place, moving as if he were the ghost of the past filled with the pains of the experiences he has gone through. Some of the dances occur in a very post-modern manner where they give it all they have at center stage then suddenly walk away as if they have given up. This is unlike many dances where dancers finish with a conclusive ending and not abruptly and disconnectedly as if every part of the performance is a different house in a Beverly Hills high street.

The facial expressions reflect agony and exuberance at the moment they are called for giving more highlight to the dances and their interpretation. The set used is very simple and straightforward. Most have no backdrop but the darkness, owing to the theme of oppression and the focus on the somber accounts of the current African-Americans' ancestors. Sets that are seen on stage have an African characteristic emanating from them, even as the scene shifted to the Western world such as the wooden chairs that are not typical of American design during those times.

The costumes vary as the scenes shift from one stage of the Diaspora to the other. From the white pants to the tattered dresses that exude the various

African experiences to the shirt and slacks of the American culture, the costumes themselves stand as the backdrop when there is none, representing the shifts in scenes and acts throughout the whole presentation. Most of the music appeals to the base animalistic and powerful drive of the show. The subterfuge of the musicality lies in the humanly instruments used.

Feet stomping onstage can both be the percussion for that dance or the music that the dancers dance to. The basic African formula for music is also laced with contemporary and more recognizable tunes that transition their adaptation to the parts of the world they have settled into from Africa, especially in America. The aspects of the set, costume and music, coupled with the expressive exploration of the movements lend to the enhancement of the theater experience letting the audience follow the world of the performers more easily.

The whole performance reaches a convergence on a central historical and cultural theme of the African forefathers until the present. Their dispersal, slavery and migration are exhibited in a non-linear manner starting from the present down to the past and back again to the present. Each movement is a depiction of the oppression and the struggle for survival. Throughout the whole performance, the scenes of acceptance and reconciliation with the events that have subsequently transpired seem obligatory and heavy-hearted.

Each scene of experiences are mystified by the alien-ness of the African culture, thus captivating the spectators more as it is combined with the more familiar contemporary movement and a sense-provoking compilation of

modern masterpieces for the genre. The piece is done beautifully that even a fastidious aficionado of the arts would find it too difficult to find fault in the artistry of the show. Each part has been thoroughly thought upon and well executed by both the choreographer and the dancers.

Though the idea of historical exposition combined with the contemporary genre is no longer new, the presentation is impressively accomplished with the subterfuge of sense-provocation and keeping every scene short as if unfinished, leaving the audiences asking for more. Each performance is something new and never boring and the transitions easy to follow and smooth never leaving the spectators wondering what is going on.