

Dance New Amsterdam, Facing Eviction, Hosts an Africa-Themed Duet

Souleymane Badolo and Nora Chipaumire offer a tale of tribes and love

By Deborah Jowitt Wednesday, Sep 22 2010

Souleymane Badolo and Nora Chipaumire titled their collaborative piece *Art/Family/Our Lives: I Ka Nye (You Look Well)*, and they do indeed look well—both healthy and handsome. A photo in their lobby exhibit at Dance New Amsterdam shows them with their heads close together—she lipsticked, smiling, and wearing a bright head scarf, he pleased. *I Ka Nye* says more about their differences, with Ghanaian master drummer Obo Addy as both musician and mediator.



Elle Chyun

Watch out for the flying rubber bands.

Souleymane Badolo, Nora Chipaumire, with Obo Addy

Dance New Amsterdam

Chipaumire was born and bred in Zimbabwe; she came to the U.S. to do graduate work, dance, and choreograph. Badolo is from Burkina Faso and maintains a troupe there, while also working in Europe and America. Their native countries are miles apart and they were raised in different African traditions, although both have studied and performed contemporary Western styles. This modest, engaging piece frames them as diverse individuals—powerful, charming, sly, and witty in their own ways.

Chipaumire begins the piece alone in an arena enclosed by spectators on three sides. Wearing a short skirt and a plain blouse, she holds a bouquet and looks demure at first.

But there's nothing perfumed about her dance. She's an amazon—tall, lean, and muscular, with a shaved head and a gorgeous bone structure. When she lunges deeply, her legs define a big swath of ground. She stretches her arms like wings, and the walls seem to vibrate. While she moves slowly, pensively, and with a velvety smoothness, Badolo's offstage voice, speaking to her in French, says things like, "I want to spend the rest of my life beside you." She in turn repeats her pattern to Nina Simone's "Be My Husband," which she has punched out of a red boombox.

Addy enters in traditional attire, circles the space, gives his hips a shake, settles in one of several chairs, and strikes his drum. Lighting designer Amanda K. Ringger makes the room sunnier, and Badolo, wearing trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, starts dancing. His style is unlike Chipaumire's space-covering one. He hunches over and keeps his legs fairly close together and his elbows near his body. He's a wonderfully slippery fellow. His knees, hips, shoulders, head, and softly treading feet enter into intricate, polyrhythmic negotiations with Addy's percussion.

When Chipaumire returns, she hurls herself onto him, and he carries her as if she were a large, limp child. That's almost their only moment of physical contact. Instead, they converse in movement. Badolo's rapid, nonstop maneuvers make Chipaumire smile or shake her head in wonder or mild exasperation. Over and over, she asserts a bold phrase of movement. Sometimes she lunges and curves an arm the way he does; sometimes he spreads his arms or lifts a leg in sympathy with her.

And sometimes you wonder where this fetching, low-keyed collaboration is heading. Its structure is slightly tentative, as if the two were feeling their way. Twice, they pose holding up a large picture frame—she putting on her best, good-girl look, he smiling hopefully. After an echt-postmodern interlude in which she tells him to stop what he's doing and join her for the next part, they manage some unison. Then Addy tackles a sort of balafon (its wooden slat keys covered by a metal sheet), Badolo takes off in his own steps again, speaking in an African tongue, and Chipaumire starts to tell (translate?) a legend of the Mossi people about a warrior princess and expert horsewoman, who meets a hunter from another tribe.

Badolo's a fool for dancing. Chipaumire, seated and flipping rubber bands like baby slingshots, has to grab him to make him stop. Finally, Addy strikes a small, boxy clay instrument, and the two move more fully into unison, even though, like the lovers in the legend, they come from different tribes and speak different languages. And the tale's ending? The princess and the hunter have a son who is as strong as his mother, "and that's how the kingdom of the Mossi came to be."

A video playing in the lobby shows Chipaumire walking down a highway and along an African path. She meets Badolo and throws herself onto him, as in *I Ka Nye*, again and again. He walks on and she keeps throwing herself, grabbing empty air, before continuing her path. I trust that's the beginning, not the end of their story.

And, as DNA's fall season proceeds, we can hope for a happy conclusion to another story: the organization's dire situation in regard to its lease, annual rent, and indebtedness to Fram Realty, which leases two floors of the building from the city. September 27 is the new court date for eviction proceedings against this immensely valuable nonprofit school and performance space. The two parties are trying to reach an agreement before then. Fingers crossed, you all!

The New York Times

Dance Review

Zimbabwe Past and Present in a Mix of Reality and Myth

By GIA KOURLAS

Published: May 23, 2010

The title of Nora Chipaumire's new dance is a mouthful and, fittingly, loaded with meaning: "lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rains will break: gukurahundi."



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Nora Chipaumire: The Zimbabwe born choreographer, right, with Souleymane Badolo at Long Island University on Friday.

In the multimedia performance, which opened Friday night at the Kumble Theater at the Long Island University Brooklyn campus, Gukurahundi refers to the massacres by the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. The production, a collaboration with the musician Thomas Mapfumo — he and Ms. Chipaumire represent two generations of exiled Zimbabweans — explores the idea of the African continent today.

Ms. Chipaumire aims to highlight Africa in "lions will roar" — specifically, what she sees as the real Africa and not the branded one. In an artistic statement she wrote that she wanted to address the preconceptions surrounding the continent, including "Africa as violent/Africa as disease and dying/Africa as famine and hunger/Africa as exotic." But as an exiled woman living in New York, she is also, more subtly perhaps, drawn to issues of cultural dislocation.

Even with the lively Afro-pop sounds of Mr. Mapfumo and his band, the Blacks Unlimited, it's a lot to take on. Ms. Chipaumire, who is credited with conceiving, choreographing and directing the show, places the musicians in the center of the stage. This is one reason, though not the only one, that the production tips strongly toward a

concert. The dancing itself is hard to see — for an hour of the nearly-90-minute work, the stage is obscured by a scrim. It's watching choreography through gauze.

The piece opens as Romain Tardy's moving video design — featuring leaves, trees and birds — is screened on the scrim, initially, at least, to striking effect. Ms. Chipaumire and Souleymane Badolo, a daringly supple dancer, appear side by side, shifting through a series of poses, frequently returning to a particular stance: feet spread, one knee bent and arms held behind the back like wings.

Ms. Chipaumire's deliberate, almost predatory approach is fascinating; she gestures to the audience, flashing a false, knowing smile and signaling with a thumb's up or a cautionary index finger before turning her back again. Mirroring her view of Africa's public and private side, Ms. Chipaumire's flinty, faintly masculine presence seems to be about what you think you see versus what is really there. But this idea is never explored deeply enough; the choreographic whole is undercut by the music. As a director Ms. Chipaumire gives up too much ground to Mr. Mapfumo, and the lion goes out with a whisper.

Double delight: Nora Chipaumire and Thomas Mapfumo

by sbroili Time to Dance

A REVIEW

Dancer/choreographer Nora Chipaumire's hour-long dance, "lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rains will break: Gukurahundi!," featuring live music by fellow Zimbabwe artist Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited weaves quite a spell.

The last performance of the East Coast premiere takes place tonight (Feb. 27) at 8 p.m. in Duke University's Reynolds Industries Theater.

Rather than a diatribe or dirge about the hardships the people in her native county have endured and continue to face, she creates from her history and her peoples' struggles, a tribute to the better self – the one who can feel sorrow and pain yet practice compassion; the one who perseveres with dignity and grace, who can still dance for the joy of it; the one who makes a quilt from the torn fabric of life.

By making her art, she shows the highest achievement of humankind – a gift of performance to the audience, yes, but a greater gift in the sense of hope for what is possible in any life.

How does she do this? By drawing not only on her gifts as a dancer and choreographer but also on other talented artists: dancer Souleymane Badolo; video animation designer Joelle Dietrick; lighting designer Olivier Clausse dit Maurice; costume designer Naoko Nagata; production coordinator Susan Hamburger; and last, but by no means least, the great Zimbabwe musician Mapfumo and his band.

All of these elements combine to create a sensory, evocative work that speaks of place (Zimbabwe) but also feels other-worldly.

There's Mapfumo's hypnotic, haunting music, driven by the watery-sounding, melodic mbira (thumb piano), and by Mapfumo's voice, both plaintive and prayerful. He and the other four musicians: Lancelot Kashesha, Gilbert Zvamaida, Christopher Muchabaiwa and Chakaipa Mhembe sit onstage. The dance opens with them in shadows as though on a misty night, lights like candles around them as they make their musical magic.

Dietrick's animated videos help conjure this world and not so much invite the audience in as engulf them. These images become increasingly large and appear to move towards the audience. Tree branches with large, eye-shaped leaves part and give the feeling of flying through treetops. Other images move viewers through a maze of ancient stone structures on which birds perch. Birds figure highly in other silhouetted images. They dart in scattered flocks and fill the sky with migrating hordes until the sky turns almost solid black. In another, the details of a large bird appear and one wonders: what kind of bird and does it live in Zimbabwe? In another close-up video, a waterfall cascades with frothy foam as it enters a river.

At times, Maurice's lighting looks like waterfalls scattered about the stage landscape.

Near the beginning of her dance, Chipaumire speaks of Zimbabwe's rivers and most famous waterfall, Victoria Falls. She mentions the current inflation rate of 1 billion percent. But that's it as far as the situation then and now in her country. No mention of massacres, suffering, injustices, exploitation by various regimes. But some video images seem to portray past white, Rhodesian rulers. The image flips to show indigenous people in traditional dress.

"Life is good," she says after she informs the audience of the inflation rate. Then, she pounds her chest and emits a defiant cry – the lion of her world. After all, the lion is her family's totem. Mapfumo is also known as the Lion of Zimbabwe for his fearless outspokenness.

While the dance does not dwell on the violence, she does communicate a sense of suffering especially in one emotionally moving scene in which she comes to help Badolo, who has collapsed as though dead or mortally wounded. She moves her body under his chest, lifts him, then holds him up by holding one hand then raising their two arms straight up. He holds her waist with his other hand and together, they move linked in a slow dance, a dance with the dead, with death itself, perhaps. Badolo also represents a duality she feels living here in the United States while her heart (her family) is in Zimbabwe. At times, Badolo looks on from a distance as Chipaumire dances. So, dancing together could also signal a bridging of this sense of separation.

Near the end of this performance, when the scrim that has shrouded the stage and performers lifts, she clearly dances with joy, a big smile on her face.

InfiniteBody

A blog on arts, culture & whatever by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Saturday, May 22, 2010

See "lions will roar" tonight!

lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rains will break: gukurahundi-- choreographed and directed by **Nora Chipaumire** and featuring original music played live by the renowned **Thomas Mapfumo & The Blacks Unlimited--**thrills and overwhelms me. The grand, propulsive, indomitable energy suggested by the title wells up, to varying degrees, in the work's visual, kinetic and sonic elements.

Romain Tardy's video projection streams over a scrim at the front of the stage and over the backdrop, creating a looming, breathing bubble of space that encloses the musicians and dancers. The images appear to expand and float towards us, inviting us to inhale them, seductively inhaling us, too. There are moments when the video shows a sky nearly blackened by silhouettes of what must be thousands of migrating birds. Perhaps it's largely because I am a birder, but each time that imagery arose, I felt shaken, not only by its beauty and dynamic flow but also by reminders of worldwide environmental and wildlife loss as well as the loss of one's native land. Chipaumire and Mapfumo, both courageous artists, represent the excellence of Zimbabwe; both are exiled from a homeland in the dead-hand grip of political repression. Tardy offers a deceptively simple visual idea here, yet one layered with profound, palpable meaning.

Mapfumo has been called "The Lion of Zimbabwe." In a previous solo, Chipaumire has worked idiosyncratic changes on classical ballet's iconic "dying swan." When this new production wrestles with all that is of earth and of heaven, Mapfumo's gentle, buoyant, healing, indestructible music flows from a seemingly limitless source. It is music that feels like confidence, spiritual security, even joy. To listen is to feel cleansed by rain. Unlike most accompanists, typically tucked away in some corner, the five entrancing musicians--Mapfumo (vocals/guitar), **Lancelot Kashesha** (percussion/vocals), **Gilbert Zvamaida** (guitar/vocals), **Christopher Muchabaiwa** (bass guitar) and **Chakaipa Mhembere** (mbira)--sit in positions of honor, at the center of the action. The dancers--Chipaumire and **Souleymane Badolo**, who hails from Burkina Faso--animate the space around them.

But these are dancers to be honored, too--the electric, mercurial Chipaumire, one of our greatest performers, and Badolo, her perfect partner, the perfect combination of solidity, rubbery malleability and resilience. Solos and duets work like jagged pieces of wood and metal tossed into the stream of music. Seemingly abstract, yet strongly evocative and expressive, they show us something of the spirit of contemporary, urban Africa and of the diaspora of progressive African-born artists. It is Chipaumire's intent to broaden our lazy perceptions of what Zimbabwe and Africa are all about--poverty, illiteracy, disease,

continual strife--and replace our limited expectations of Africa's arts, too. I'm reminded of singer Emeline Michel's similar aim to foster awareness of Haiti's culture and strengths, and Michel would well understand the apt Rumi verse that Chipaumire quotes in her program notes:

*Dance whe you're broken open.
Dance if you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance when you're perfectly free.*

Many in the opening night audience treated the performance like a concert--applauding after every musical number, treating the dancers, too, like rock stars. Some even greeted choice moments with ululations or clapped along with parts of the music. After a short while, I realized this wasn't distracting, just different, and it might be exactly what Chipaumire wanted. (After all, she set some of that clapping into the movement.) In a post-performance Q&A moderated by Farai Chideya, she spoke about how a lot of New York's contemporary dance artists are content to perform mostly for colleagues and people in the know, an echo chamber of sorts. She wants to break out of that "dance ghetto," as she called it. Hooking up with the world-acclaimed Mapfumo and his music, she said, frankly, is part of her strategy. As someone who has raised this issue, too, I hail her efforts. In *lions will roar*, her heroic vision, determination and skill have brought us a work that should resonate widely and is not to be missed.

Exclusive Q&A: Dancer/Choreographer Nora Chipaumire

Dance/Opera Exclusive Interview Nora Chipaumire Thomas Mapfumo
2:45 pm Friday Oct 2, 2009 by Zachary Whittenburg



Zimbabwe-born dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire has joined forces with with exiled Chimurenga poet/musician Thomas Mapfumo and his band, *The Blacks Unlimited* to create a new multimedia performance that she explains is about “about loss, grief, displacement, trauma and a confrontation with those African brands that we have become complicit in selling, consuming and perpetuating.” *lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rains will break: gukurahundi* premiered last night at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art and will tour the United States through 2010.

Flavorpill: Upon beginning this work you said that working with Thomas was going to be “the most important and significant collaboration” you’ve ever done.

Nora Chipaumire: Thomas Mapfumo is Zimbabwe’s most significant artist and a childhood hero of mine. I’m a nervous wreck! I have to admit that. I’m frightened shitless to be around [The Blacks Unlimited], honestly — I have to meet their power and energy, the expectations I’ve placed on myself and everybody I’ve brought together for this project.

FP: Did you leave Zimbabwe before or after his exile?

NC: I left twenty years ago, and chose to stay because, as a female contemporary dancer, it would be much harder to be what I am there and make a living at it. Thomas has been here, not by choice, for about ten years.

FP: Has working with Urban Bush Women influenced how you construct movement?

NC: Yes and no. I have my own process. Even though Jawole Will Jo Zollar is a very significant mentor and friend, as an African I was always an outsider — my point of view is from outside the American experience. Jawole has been a magnificent teacher, though. I can call her at midnight, in tears, and say “Jawole, I’m scared! What am I supposed to do here?!” And she’ll say, “Take a breath, Nora.” My relationship with her is a real privilege and her advice has always been right on.

FP: Your other collaborators, are they from New York as well?

NC: No. My lighting designer is from France and I have two animators creating projections: Joelle Dietrick from Tallahassee and Romain Tardy, who is also French but lives in Brussels.

FP: An international project.

NC: Yes, which is something that I believe in — my generation is more inclined to think globally and spread out. I try to reach out to artists who are daring and take risks. Or who have nothing to lose, and just want to try something.

FP: You want *gukuruhundi* to be about “the benefits and limitations of living outside your native culture.” What things are on each side?

NC: I can’t manufacture the charge I get from breathing the energy [of Zimbabwe] every single day. But it’s a very dramatic place — living outside helps me look at it a little bit more quietly, more objectively. I also have the ability to make this work in America: most of the artists there want to be talking about the issues I am but they have to find ways to do it that don’t endanger their lives. There’s freedom here to figure it out, to address this thing we call Zimbabwe.

FP: So it’s more of a memory-mining operation.

NC: Yes, which is a very beautiful thing, even if it can be selective. But I also interact constantly with my family there and, of course, you can’t escape the news — there’s always something about Zimbabwe on the news.

FP: Do you get the same information from both sources?

NC: There's a huge difference between simple truths and the "main attractions" media gravitates to. I'm interested in learning how to turn the gaze away from the violence and the starvation — it exists, but it's not the entire picture. When I'm talking with other Zimbabweans, we're cognizant of the fact that we're surviving, and that's extremely important to me. Over there is a safe place to have all the terrible things happen so we can live happily over here. It's a strange part of human nature. But people are constantly going to Africa to do their research, you know [laughs], to mine the wealth of knowledge of life that is there. I do think a majority of Americans see Africa as some huge abyss of famine, strange diseases and wars and don't consider that ordinary lives continue regardless.

FP: If people haven't been it can remain an abstract — a negative one.

NC: There's a perception from outside of, "Oh, why don't they do something about it?" when they are — constantly! I want to pay homage to that, but it works both ways: people living outside the U.S. have an equally-inaccurate image of life here.

FP: The title of your show is a mouthful — who's doing all of this roaring and flying and wrestling?

NC: The people who care are roaring about Zimbabwe! It's also a reference to Thomas Mapfumo, who is called the Lion of Zimbabwe. My totem is a lion. And the swans, they're the dancers, the artists, trying to create another idea and ideal. The rains are indicative of growth, cleansing and change.



Nora Chipaumire; photo by Mkrtych Malkhasyan, from the film *Nora* by Alla Kovgan and David Hinton.

FP: In addition to referencing the violent beginnings of the Mugabe regime.

NC: That's true: *gukuruhundi* can refer to the present as well as the past, and we are playing with both, absolutely.

FP: Watching a bit of your rehearsal, your dancing was surprisingly celebratory. Not light, but it doesn't feel like a lamentation or a eulogy.

NC: Well it shouldn't, because Zimbabwe's not dead! [Laughs] It may be down on it's knees, but it's not dead, you know? Change is happening, but it's a process, the same as decolonization and independence were. I'm interested in showing the beauty of the Zimbabwean people and our love for life. We can't just focus on the death and the dying — we're a smart, elegant people with a ridiculous sense of humor. We love to dance, laugh, and make beautiful music.

FP: How is the dynamic between you and Thomas?

NC: Super. He's a really generous man and, I have to say, fearless about this project. "Who? What? Dance? Okay, what kind of dance? Whatever, let's do it." [Laughs] It was so encouraging for a contemporary dancer like myself. I've always admired choreographers who are able to work with Philip Glass or whoever. Thomas is a superstar — much more important than I am. [Laughs]

FP: Working with him brings your goals closer.

NC: He's not afraid to make a really good hook. What's the shame in just dancing? Why does it have to be so abstract and obtuse that nobody gets the point, you know? I'm trying to lose some of that. You train in some school for contemporary dance and it just gets so heady and abstract. I'm trying to regain the emotional power, the sheer visceral and physical power that connects one human being to another, because if we can make that connection then we're able to have a conversation.

FP: About the larger issues.

NC: That surround life! That surround capitalism, that surround Africa, fair trade, aid — we want a fair playing field, not aid and donations. We are not beggars, we are a productive people, full of pride. I'm taking down this perception of Africa as a continent of beggars, of people who cannot stand on their own two feet saying, "Send us food."

FP: Which is difficult, given all the economic and political structures in place to perpetuate that.

NC: All brands exist to make someone money. A starving Africa is like Nike: it's a brand that sells.

Main image: Nora Chipaumire; photo by Antoine Tempe.

The New York Times

Dance Review

The Anguish of War, Expressed in Movement

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

Published: May 3, 2008

Nora Chipaumire's "Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution)" demands close attention, even though she doesn't always make it easy. But it's no easy thing Ms. Chipaumire is trying to do in translating her youth during Zimbabwe's second war of liberation into a 60-minute dance-theater work.



Briana Blasko for The New York Times
Nora Chipaumire at Dance Theater Workshop.

She doesn't offer the neat Hollywood arc from suffering to redemption, but a fragmentary, raw bundle of deeply personal associations. You feel you are watching someone wrestling with a knot that won't come undone. "Chimurenga" is not, I imagine, the last piece on the subject that she will create. Not nearly.

Tall and muscular, with her head shaved bald save for a tiny patch toward the front, Ms. Chipaumire is capable of devouring a stage. But here she is confined, whether by slanting rectangles of light; a heap of red, earthlike material; or the chokehold of overwhelming emotion. Often she is doubled over, her feet stamping out a rhythm, her rigid arms flung out or pumping, as if she were doggedly running.

Her hands, frequently raised, are sometimes spread in supplication, sometimes defiantly clenched. In one repeated motif she mimes throwing a stone, only to arc her body backward and around violently, as if the forces she is battling have swatted her away like a nettlesome fly.

Passages of strangled rage are interwoven with quieter moments suggesting lost days of domestic tranquillity: Ms. Chipaumire gently crouched and balancing a large gourd on her head, or softly reciting a list of remembered pleasures. An evocative film by Chantal Buard and Kristin Tieche splices footage of her running through an urban ghost town with contemplative close-ups; Alex Potts's sound installation (much of it emanating from a gorgeous medley of hanging gourds) likewise mixes hip-hop, jagged piano compositions and tinny lullabies of the music box variety.

And then there is the joyous music of Thomas Mapfumo, the great, politically conscious Zimbabwean singer-songwriter. In one striking section Ms. Chipaumire stands at the front corner of the stage, staring down a white spotlight. "I am a child of revolution," she says, before lunging into a fierce, pelvis-rolling attack to "Shumba," by Mr. Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited.

It is a moment of glorious release — one she doesn't allow herself (or the audience) to savor for very long.

Nora Chipaumire performs on Saturday at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077, dtw.org.

Nora Chipaumire Storms the Barricades

Revisiting a war-torn youth

By Deborah Jowitt Tuesday, May 13 2008



Yi-Chun Wu

Nora Chipaumire in her *Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution)*.

Nora Chipaumire

Dance Theater Workshop

April 30 through May 3

If you didn't know that Nora Chipaumire is a powerful woman with a strong message to deliver, you'd sense it several seconds before her solo *Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution)* begins. She doesn't slip onto the stage during a blackout; you can hear her bare feet strike the floor as she strides into place. When a parallelogram of light appears around her, she's got those feet planted, and she's already breathing hard. Her shaven head and angular face are shining with sweat. She rolls up the sleeves of her white outfit and stares toward the mob (us) confronting her. Watch out!

It's lucky that she doesn't take a real rock or two from one of the small piles on the floor; the imaginary ones she hurls could break your head. We are in Chipaumire's native Zimbabwe at the time of the Second Revolution, and this is a woman at the barricades—throwing stones, falling back, thrusting one aggressive hip at us as if it had a cutting edge. A film (by Chantal Buard and Kristin Tieche) of Chipaumire running through a ruined, desolate cityscape is projected on the back wall. She looks as if she could keep running forever.

Chimurenga is an expansion of Chipaumire's 2004 *Convoys, Curfews and Roadblocks*, and she has added film, décor, a new sound score, and three costume changes. I get that feeling that she has stretched her explosive material a little too thin. There are dead spots amid the many gripping passages. For instance, we wait in near darkness while she changes from one rough-edged yet shapely outfit by Naoko Nagata to another; we can't quite see her, but we can't not see her either. Her use of assemblage as a structure often makes it hard to understand how the vivid moments connect or add up.

The piece is dedicated to her brother, who died in 1994 at 33 (at present, life expectancy for males in Zimbabwe is reported to be 37 years). Perhaps it's his face that we see in close-up shots, along with photos of destroyed neighborhoods. She recites all the demeaning names for Africans used by the controlling white minority when Zimbabwe was Rhodesia. Huddling over a tiny pile of spot-lit rocks, she feverishly, uselessly rearranges them. At one point, we hear the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's 9th, played on what might be a music box or a distant, ruined piano.

As Chipaumire moves from one territory to another—each one delineated by a window or corridor of light on the floor—she relives tribal customs, happy memories of school days, and flight. Alex Potts's sound installation of hanging gourds, beautifully lit by David Robertson, conceals small speakers issuing intermittent murmur, but Chipaumire also balances one gourd on her head like a village woman coming from the well, flicking water with her fingers. She remembers cream pies and licks her lips over a special kind of orange juice and "the boys at Morgan High." Once she runs in place and the lighting casts dual shadows.

She's a wonderful dancer—settling into deeply bent knees, swaying her hips, wheeling her arms. In one arresting journey, her mouth opening in a silent howl, she ventures along a downstage path of light (this may be the part with music by Thomas Mapfumo & the Blacks Unlimited), pausing to lift one leg and look at her foot, as if placing it down required thought in addition to care. Tread softly on this troubled earth. Thoughtfulness is a crucial element in her performing. No matter what bitter, angry, wild explosion of movement she lashes herself into, you can see it begin to well up like the stirrings of a volcano.

The Artclectic Academic

July 2, 2008...3:36 pm

Featured Artist: Nora Chipaumire



Above: Nora Chipaumire mid-sketch at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (Photo taken by Al Hall)

It's taken me an unprecedented MONTH to react to this artist, primarily because her residency at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) had such a profound impact on me. My interactions with Nora Chipaumire started because of a history professor who invited me to one of MANCC's "entry points." I had been to one other such "informal showing" before, and I had never been more intrigued by a dance event.* MANCC doesn't present performances; instead, they invite choreographic fellows to come for residencies and the public only ever sees their work in its most embryonic and mutable phases. This takes pressure off of the dancer/choreographers so that they can concentrate on movement and experimentation, but it also creates a qualitatively different atmosphere for reception. It's an environment that I have come to prefer as a more accessible way of wrapping my head around dance compositions.

During the few weeks between that initial invitation and the last showing of her collaborative piece, I have been humbled to do research for, work with, learn from, and laugh with Nora Chipaumire. She's a person who enters the room with an irresistible magnetism about her. She says more with every detail of her body and movement than any other artist I have ever seen, and not only with her movement onstage. For example, Chipaumire cuts her hair like the male warriors in her clan:



Above: Chipaumire sports her "lion" hair during a rehearsal

Despite the centrality of natural hair to an aesthetic of Afro-centrism in African American style and culture, it's probably difficult for most Americans to understand the full symbolic effect of this look for Chipaumire. Beyond being an international traveler, a renowned artist, financially independent woman, and generally boisterous personality, grooming this look smashes up Zimbabwean gender roles and norms even further. When she dances, she draws her vocabulary from an equally in-your-face repertory of movement.

One of the most poignant and fascinating images from her recent work involves an image of a Zimbabwean man who was burned alive in South Africa. Rather than embody a passive (if panicked) human torch, Chipaumire's version of this person focuses on his humanity, his agency as an individual to experience suffering. The informal showing featured the music of Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited (in the flesh!), but I watched Nora rehearse this sketch to the sounds of the Muslim call to prayer, which lent

both an window of intimacy into that person's relationship with his Creator and a globalizing effect to this image of violence (particularly since Islam is widespread in Africa). The result embodied in performance the suffering of many people around the world, but most obviously and painfully the Zimbabweans who have recently experienced xenophobia and violence in South Africa.



Above: Chipaumire "on fire" at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (Photo taken by Al Hall)

Chipaumire's choreography juxtaposes of horrifically painful images behind masks of utter bliss: "everything's fine, I'm fine, I'm wonderful, life is good" . . . complete with toothy minstrel grins. The whole atmosphere reeks of Dunbar's masquerade, now thrown into stark contemporary relief through a more global light. Bondage, capture, torture, beating, and burning move past this mask, however, all with a sense of personhood and dignity that gives voice to the many thousands of voiceless suffering in Zimbabwe. Chipaumire's process, moreover, comments on violence in a manner that extends a borderless statement of personhood both toward and on behalf of all who suffer needlessly.

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The Power and the Beauty

Dancing humanity in a fine new space

By Deborah Jowitt Tuesday, Apr 11 2006

The rhythms in *Convoys, Curfews and Roadblocks*(2004), choreographed and performed by Chipaumire, are those of gathering strength and then attacking. This ferocious solo evokes memories of her homeland, Zimbabwe—not just the scent of jacaranda, but racial prejudice and violence. In the dark, we hear her voice reciting all the vicious or condescending names Africa's whites apply to the country's black population. "I'm a revolutionary," her text asserts, "a child of struggle." Chipaumire's a formidable figure—tall, with a strong-boned face and a shaven head. When she lifts a bent leg, foot flexed behind her, and slowly brings it around to the front, she primes us for battle. When she leans away, the heel of her front leg anchored to the floor in front of her, she looks like a bowstring being drawn back. And it's us she's hurling invisible rocks or clods of earth at, us she's kicking, us she never takes her eyes off, even though new enemies crop up on all sides to make her grab her belly and retch.