

Voices of Strength: Contemporary Dance & Theater
by Women from Africa
Kettly Noël, Maria Helena Pinto, Nelisiwe Xaba,
Nadia Beugré, and Bouchra Ouizguen

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by

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A yawning gap best approximates the American narrative on Africa. A familiar set of stereotypes stoked by a mostly disinterested media props up the old storyline. You know...it's the one on poverty, disease, conflict, and corruption. The typical tale frames Africans as one-dimensional victims of despair, not complex people "like us." The truth is the world's second largest continent is comprised of 54 nations, seven of which rank among the world's ten fastest growing economies.¹ According to projections by the IMF, on average, Africa will have the world's fastest growing economy of any continent over the next five years.

Contemporary visual and performing arts have surged alongside Africa's economic expansion in the last decade. Not unlike their contemporaries in commerce, African artists live and work in the paradox of the present. The artist lens on the African present reframes the past and suggests another view of the

¹ Howard A. French, "The Next Asia Is Africa: Inside the Continent's Rapid Economic Growth."
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/05/the-next-asia-is-africa-inside-the-continent-rapid-economic-growth/257441/>

future, one in which women stand not only to gain but to benefit the whole.²

African women's artistic voices can be considered prophetic. A voice is nothing less than the shared foundation of art making and democracy building. Thus the courage to hone and assert a voice is essential to the future. Finding their voices, women artists carve out fresh spaces for hope, critical thought, and dialogue. Through them we recognize women's creative drive as a vast, potent and sustainable resource however undertapped.

Beginning in the late 1990's, a number of African women artists—notably in dance and the visual arts—stepped forth to interrogate the disillusioning confines of women's post-independence/post-apartheid lives. Ivorian choreographer Béatrice Kombé (1973-2007) proved a harbinger of women who would build art not only by women but about women's lives. The intensity of her work was awe-inspiring and blew open a choreographic space previously almost exclusively dominated by male performers.

Women's voices have been steadily strengthening in the past decade and in fall of 2012, American audiences will have the opportunity to engage with five contemporary theater makers/choreographers and cultural leaders— **Nelisiwe Xaba** (South Africa), **Kettly Noël** (Haiti/Mali), Gbahihonon **Nadia Beugré** (Côte d'Ivoire), **Maria Helena Pinto** (Mozambique), and **Bouchra Ouizguen** (Morocco)—who will unfurl the individual truths, subversions, comforts, and interrogations of their artistic journeys in a six city American tour, curated and produced by MAPP International Productions in partnership with The Africa Contemporary Arts

² *ibid.*; see also, Nancy Gibbs, "To Fight Poverty, Invest in Girls," *Time Magazine* February 14, 2011. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2046045,00.html>

Consortium (TACAC), entitled, *Voices of Strength: Contemporary Dance & Theater by Women from Africa*. In a series of meetings and interviews I conducted at the KVS Theatre in Brussels in June 2012, supported by MAPP International and TACAC, the choreographers generously shared their insights into artistic creation, their personal and professional stories, and their concerns about the dynamic situations in Africa that so often strike women first.³

“I refuse to put despair on stage”

Nelisiwe Xaba, choreographer—with Kettly Noël —of *Correspondances*
(South Africa)

Dance theater maker Nelisiwe Xaba questions her positioning as a South African artist: “Do you create work because you are struggling? Am I always going to create work about women suffering and blacks suffering and this one and the other one suffering and this one doesn’t have a right and the other one has too many rights?” Beginning in 1961, the worldwide cultural boycott of South Africa turned South Africa’s innovators inward. Unmediated by outsiders’ interests and influences, artists built uniquely South African creative processes. Looking critically into their lives and social conditions to make meaning on the canvas and the stage, artists hit hard against oppression to create a culture of resistance. Apartheid ended in 1994 but political/gender/racial conflicts did not.

In stunningly visual works, Neli has carved an alternative confrontation of the South African/global reality. She explained, “Our world can be so dark and so

³ Unless otherwise noted, all artist quotes and related discussions in the article are attributed to the 2012 interviews conducted by the author at KVS, Brussels, Belgium.

hard. So I refuse to relive that on stage, and to suffer on stage—I really refuse.” Neli takes on colonialism, democracy, globalization, cultural traditions, and personal relationships with equal fervor. She explains, “I have to laugh about the racial issues that we have in South Africa, the gender issues we have in South Africa. I have to laugh about it or else I die...”

Soweto-born Neli was politically conscious from as young as she can recall. Born in 1970, she was not yet six years of age when the police opened fire on Soweto schoolchildren marching in protest of the enforced study of Afrikaans. She said, “For me having been born in Soweto one was forced to be political, it wasn’t something I had to learn, it wasn’t something outside of me. I’ve spent my life fighting for equality and freedom.”⁴

But she would also fight for herself...through dance. Inspired by the black protagonists of the American television series “Fame,” Neli auditioned for the newly opened Johannesburg Dance Foundation at the age of seventeen where she studied for four years. After a short stint in New York to perform, Neli auditioned for a scholarship to London’s Ballet Rambert School where she studied from 1996-1997. She returned to Johannesburg to dance with the Pact Dance Company, South Africa’s largest modern dance company at the time. She worked with theater and visual artists, and began to choreograph her own work in 2001.

Correspondances is part romp/part theater/part mock-confession. Neli’s and Kettly Noël’s (Haiti/Mali) shared path of friendship disturbs the strata of race,

⁴ Nelisiwe Xaba quoted in Joan D. Frosch ““Only the sky will stop me” African Women Changing Contemporary Dance: Kettly Noël, Nelisiwe Xaba, and Mamela Nyamza,” Bates Dance Festival, 2011. <http://www.mappinternational.org/artists/view/47/>

gender, power, positioning, and perception lurking underfoot. One repartee-rich tableau follows the next and multiple meanings accrue to make the familiar strange, and strangely funny. Neli explains,

Because both Kettly and I find ourselves in between cultures: in between Eurocentric cultures and African cultures. And also we are questioning ourselves: Who we are? I mean, we are not having a headache about it—I think I did that enough already when I was in America.

Neli reflects on returning to the U.S. with the *Voices of Strength* tour: “I can’t say it feels like ‘coming back home’, no, I can’t say that, like the Americans usually say.” Rather, the familiarity she feels with Americans lies with artists and “the similarities of trying to do art in a place where there is actually no support.” Interspersing her reflection with gentle laughter, she continued, “This struggle interests me. I mean it’s silly also to want to struggle for the rest of my life. I am attracted to struggles.” With a broad smile and ironic chuckle, Neli summarized, “I am full of contradictions.”

Do you think to be in the first world is to be in the front?

Kettly Noël, choreographer (with Neliwise Xaba) of *Correspondances* (Haiti/Mali)

Today the long stable Sahelian nation of Mali is rapidly crumbling. After two decades of elected governments, a March 2012 coup d’état installed a military junta under an America-trained officer.⁵ The northern two-thirds of the country is now under the control of Al Qaeda-linked Islamists who seek to enforce Shariah law. A

⁵ *New York Times* July 18, 2012.

half-million people have been displaced.⁶ Kettly Noël reports that Bamako, the nation's capital and her home, is "OK, for the moment," but worries, "Until when?"

Although she makes her life in Bamako, Kettly was born and raised in Haiti where she danced professionally from the age of seventeen. After living briefly in France and Benin, Kettly and her family established their home in Bamako in late 1999. Committed to the development of dance in Mali, Kettly built the dance-training center *Donko Seko* in 2001 and a youth company in 2002. In 2003, she created *Danse Bamako Danse*, Mali's first international festival of contemporary dance. In 2010, Kettly hosted *Danse l'Afrique Danse*, the biennial pan-African choreographic competition. It was an epic international undertaking: companies from across the continent performed; critics, curators, funders, and scholars from across Africa and around the globe attended.

In the early days after her move to Bamako, Kettly recalls that some mistook her for a man, imagining that only a man might speak so boldly and take leadership in the transgressive terrain of contemporary dance. Kettly sees some improvement in gender relations over the decade plus she has lived in Mali. Women may be seen driving more, and increasingly handling the affairs of their lives in public. In the face of recent events in Mali, however, all bets are off.

As Kettly prepared for the *Voices of Strength* tour, she reflected on what it meant for her to return to the U.S. to perform. America is not unknown to Kettly: her mother lives in Massachusetts and Kettly performed recently in New York (2011). Stubborn stereotypes and limitations still imposed on African artists trouble her

⁶ Reuters, July 17, 2012.

deeply. “If I am Haitian they want to see voodoo. If Neli is South African they want to see Zulu dance. I hate that,” she decries. No, Neli will not do a Zulu dance; and no, Kettly will not perform voodoo. “We [Africans] exist, we think, we question, we create,” she insists. She continued, “We [in Africa] are not in the back. Do you think to be in the first world is to be in the front?”

“Undoing” territories became a starting point for Kettly and Neli Xaba in their collaborative work, *Correspondances*. They were introduced to one another in Johannesburg. They decided to create not a work of choreography—but an experiment in friendship. Berne, Bamako, Johannesburg, Paris were among the points of rendezvous they used to construct their theatrical voyage. They wanted to discuss ideas, “to bitch about the struggles in their lives.” They did not want to “dance.” They most certainly did not want to conflate their disparate personal creative processes into a formulaic work. They emailed, they called; and even when they met to “work,” they mostly talked. Their discussions became the core of the piece.

The frothiness of *Correspondances* lies in the acutely humorous and satirical way the work’s spoken/movement conversations alternately layer gender, power, politics, and globalizations—present and past. For one example later in the work, in response to Neli’s exacting ballet mistress commands, Kettly summarily upends the naturalized and “universal” dominion of ballet. She performs a literal interpretation of *pas de bourée* as a drunken saunter and *piqué* as a deadly knife attack. The “agreed upon” reality of ballet is rendered suddenly and disturbingly strange.

“If you remain where you are and look for liberty, it will not come.”

Nadia Beugré, choreographer of *Quartiers Libres*
(Côte d’Ivoire)

Quartiers Libres shocks the system for pedagogical effect. Nadia Beugré seeks liberation and is determined to awaken others to the struggle, as well. Freedom will not be handed to you, she insists. It is a struggle you must be willing to take on. It requires practice, vigilance and interrogation. At what point does a person become free? By imposing and breaking boundaries, subjugating and liberating, entering darkness and emerging into light, her work asks: What can one withstand? How can one overcome adversity? Nadia’s aloneness on stage reiterates that only we can free ourselves.

Nadia’s *Bété* name, *Gbahihonon*, means woman of power. Nadia accrues awe as she superimposes oppressor and oppressed to the eclipse of her own control. As she develops new work she gives carte blanche to her artistic collaborators in the work to respond to her “desires” and impose restrictions to which she must respond. “If you remain where you are and look for your liberty, it will not come,” she explained. With each opportunity to assert her voice she strengthens herself to meet the next challenge; “like recharging a battery,” she says. As such, the accumulation of reactions opens a new territory of choreographic thought: one propelled by the courage to react.

Nadia was born in Zikisso, Côte d’Ivoire in 1981. She was raised two hundred miles west in Abobo, the densely populated Islamic migrant northern suburb of Abidjan. The neighborhood Nadia affectionately calls her “ghetto,” was also the

bloodstained site of protest against former President Laurent Gbagbo. Defeated in the November 2010 election, Gbagbo refused to cede to opposition leader, Alassane Ouattara. On March 3, 2011, Abobo women gathered to protest Gbagbo's desperate hold onto power. Seven Abobo women died. The overall toll of the post-election violence was estimated at more than 3,000 dead.⁷ Nadia, who observed the situation from abroad, recalled the disgust she felt for the insatiable hunger of power. The phenomenon she came to call "the bulimic politician" is an image she startlingly and unforgettably portrays in *Quartiers Libres*.

Nadia was the fifth child of the fifth wife of her father, a convert to Islam. She recalls her mother as a "beaten wife," who was forced to flee the family home when Nadia was not quite 10 years old. An emotionally strong and athletic child, Nadia was unafraid to fight for her place in life. Dance became her chance to excel and she began performing with the traditional dance group called Dante Theatre.

In 1997, Nadia joined the contemporary dance company Tchétché which was founded by Béatrice Kombé, and her career took off. Kombé's *Sans Repère* won 2nd place in *Les rencontres chorégraphiques de l'Afrique et de l'Océan indien* held in Madagascar in 1999, propelling the young company to tours across Africa, Europe, and the United States. The sudden death of Kombé in 2007 parted a sea of loss for the budding field of African contemporary dance and for Nadia. She lost not only her artistic partner, but her life partner. Nadia rededicated herself to her art form and to

⁷ "Countries at Risk Profiles 2012," Genocide Watch, p. 38. Genocidewatch.org

forming her own voice in the Montpellier training center of French choreographer, Mathilde Monnier.⁸ *Quartiers Libres* is a direct result.

The imagery of glistening empty bottles looms large for Nadia in the work. Is the life that quenches thirst to be cast away after its water has been consumed? How many emptied bottles/women are scattered across Africa, Europe, and the world? Do we discard our “used/misused selves” like empty memories/bottles? Can we not collect and re-create ourselves? Can we recycle pain into awareness, critique, work, love, and life? For Nadia, *Quartiers Libres* is not only a call to action but her rite of passage back to self.

***“Be ready to speak.
Suffering is rife in the world but silence need not be.”***

Maria Helena Pinto, choreographer of *Sombra*
(Mozambique)

Americans would be hard pressed to imagine a 21st century modern dance choreographer who captivates the mainstream media. In Mozambique, Maria Helena Pinto has become a celebrity in her own right. In 2010, the National Radio of Mozambique named her “Cultural Personality of the Year.” Maria has focused her artistic métier on a long-term fight for development of arts and culture in Mozambique. While her aesthetic and societal concerns are of her own time, her commitment connects her to a lineage of Mozambican cultural producers who struggled for freedom of expression, well prior to independence. Maria is also a mother and a scholar: she is currently writing the final chapters of her dissertation

⁸ Since 1994, Monnier has directed the *Centre Chorégraphique National Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon*, where Nadia followed the ex.e.r.ce. program.

for the Ph.D. at University of Paris 8 in which she analyzes Mozambican choreographic aesthetics, a movement in which she has fearlessly innovated. For example, as a young choreographer performing *Amadsofer* (1995), Maria recalls tens of thousands of Mozambicans flocking to see the duet performed in the nude with her late husband Augusto Cuvilas.

Apart from her young son, conversations with Maria often revolve around another enduring labor of love: DANS'ARTES, a visionary arts center to be located just outside of Maputo. Construction of the theater and rehearsal spaces is scheduled to begin in January 2013. At its core, DANS'ARTES seeks to be a place for artists, and people, to heal. It provides the physical space for dreams to be recaptured and for creativity recalculated. Maria described DANS'ARTES as "...a space to be in peace, a space where people can come and dream a little bit and feel better on earth, and to find a space to say "Yes, I have to be here" and to reflect "Why...?"

Not unrelated to her choreographic work *Sombra*, she seeks to enlighten a sense of purpose so that "life becomes less heavy to live." She explained further,

That's what I am trying to do—to give some little light. I have enough to share. If we really work and keep focused on what we are doing and why we are doing it, we can begin to build better possibilities for others. How can we contribute through arts and culture to change something for the people of that society? It's my mission: "Let's do it guys!" I am almost 40 years old. That means I do not have 20 more years.

For a little girl enamored with dancing, timing was everything. After decades of armed struggle, Mozambique liberated itself from Portugal's notoriously violent colonial rule in 1975. In 1976, Maria was born in Maputo, the capital of a free Mozambique. The brutal Mozambican Civil War began just two years after

independence and lasted until 1992, scarring the backdrop of her youth. In 1983, Maria, aged seven, was selected to study at the newly created *Escola Nacional de Dança* (END). For nine years, Maria studied traditional Mozambican dance, Cuban modern dance and jazz, and Russian ballet and music. After completing her studies at END, she and Augusto Cuvilas, who had trained with her since childhood, were offered scholarships to study in Cuba. Upon returning to Mozambique, she danced and choreographed with the *Companhia Nacional de Canto e Dança* from 1995 to 2009 and served as its artistic director in 2004.

As Maria tells it, a number of years ago, she found herself ensconced in a shadow—one she had cast on herself. She reflected deeply on “a body, a self, that existed but was not seen, not attended to, unrecognized and unrecognizable, navigating in the dark as if it were a ghost...a ghost of herself.” She investigated the darkness she felt and *Sombra* was born.

In the dramaturgy Maria wrote for *Sombra*, she explained her thinking about the work:

Upon reflection in social terms, I would say that I have thought about all those women who have been ignored by society in one way or another but who, in reality, are intelligent, enterprising, and dynamic women who have headed multiple accomplishments for society in general. Women who create, build, envision, plan, organize, run, guide, and more... (Pinto 2007)

Maria dedicates *Sombra* to all women hiding from themselves. If we cannot alleviate human suffering, perhaps we can create the conditions by which people may be relieved, unburdened, soothed, and encouraged to step out of the shadows. She urges, “Take a stance, speak, don’t be afraid: move from the shadow to the light.”

“Rules are made to be broken!”

Bouchra Ouizguen, choreographer of *Madame Plaza*

(Morocco)

Of the four performers on stage, three women—Naima Sahmoud, Kabboura Ait Ben Hmad, and Fatima El Hanna—recline full-bodied like masterworks by Botero. Supported by long cushioned and tapestried benches, their unpretentious ease transforms the stage into an intimate and familial space. They are *shikhat*: women whose voices carry the beauty and the burden of a paradoxical poetic musical heritage known as *‘aita* or the “cry” or “call.” In later moments of the piece, their wailing refrains heave with beauty, magnitude, and the tenuousness of life.

The fourth woman is choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen whose *Madame Plaza* is named for the Marrakech nightclub where she first encountered Naima, Kabboura, and Fatima. The sound of *‘aita* stirred Bouchra’s soul with memories of the festivities she loved as a child. The popularity of the genre continues, “For a large majority of Moroccans, *shikhat* are an indispensable part of religious and national festivity.”⁹ The *‘aita* music has been performed as entertainment in urban cabaret settings beginning as early as the 1930’s and *shikhat* have entered commercial recording with great success both in Morocco and among the Moroccan diaspora. But the deep ache of *‘aita* can broach unspoken truths for which *shikhat* can be admired—and loathed as outsiders to a mainstream culture that idealizes

⁹ Deborah A. Kapchan, “Moroccan Female Performers Defining the Social Body, in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 107, No. 42, p.87.

women's silence and propriety.¹⁰ In Moroccan society, *shikhat* regularly challenge the “natural order” of culture and are framed as “everything that respectable women are not.”¹¹

Captivated by the singers' artistry and authority, Bouchra came to understand that Naima, Kabboura, and Fatima already exercised the freedom and daring of the body (and soul) she sought for herself as a choreographer. Facing each other across a span of generations, performance genres, social classes, and aesthetics, a tender trust developed among the women. Their improbable collaboration began. Bouchra is quick to point out that the work is not shaped as a dance but rather a “human, loving, friendly, maternal and ethereal encounter,” a reflection of their creative process. She also had something to learn from the adversity they have known in their lives, for Bouchra, too, sacrificed societal acceptance and status quo for the call of her art form. The *'aita* themes of love, longing, and loss closely aligned with her path in contemporary dance.

Bouchra is on a quest—a search for herself as an artist—in a world where that very signifier calls her personhood into question. Steeped in the beauty of her homeland and her deep musical and dance heritage, Bouchra performed as a soloist in oriental dance in Morocco from 1995 to 2000. The closer she came to making dance her life's profession, however, the more friends and family sought to dissuade her from “a difficult and marginalized choice of life”; she explained further, “Apart from a few exceptions, I was keenly discouraged by my entourage. But rules are

¹⁰ Haideh Moghissi, *Women and Islam: Social Conditions, Obstacles, and Prospects*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 2004) 2:399.

¹¹ Deborah A. Kapchan, “Moroccan Female Performers Defining the Social Body,” in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 107, No. 42, p. 90.

made to be broken!”¹²

In 1998, when she was one of the few brave and inspired girls who participated in a series of contemporary dance workshops organized by the French Institute of Marrakech, Bouchra was awarded a scholarship to enter the professional training program at *Centre Chorégraphique National Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon*, known as ex.e.r.ce. The center, directed by Mathilde Monnier since 1994, has supported the choreographic growth of numerous international artists, including Nadia Beugré (Côte d’Ivoire), Bouchra’s colleague on the *Voices of Strength* tour. A residency followed in Paris at the *Centre National de la Danse*, where Bouchra worked with Boris Charmatz in the Bocal/*Etudes* project. In 2002, together with Taoufiq Izeddiou and Saïd Ait El Moumen, Bouchra founded *ANANIA*, a contemporary dance company in Marrakech. The company created the dance festival *On Marche*, now in its 7th year.

In spite of Bouchra’s decade plus of accomplishments, she reported, “I feel I haven’t done anything yet. There’s so much to do in Morocco, art is an abandoned building site here... Grants can sometimes help to repaint the facades, but the foundations aren’t solid. I hope things will change, I feel optimistic and I’m doing what I have to do.”¹³ Indeed, Morocco’s contemporary dance scene is growing but not unlike its burgeoning visual arts scene, opportunities for training, support of research and development of new work, and international visibility lag. As for

¹² Bouchra Ouizguen quoted in <http://eng.babelmed.net/index.php/dossier/828-feature-young-creative-women/3480-young-moroccan-artists-militants-of-meaning.html>

¹³ *ibid.*

audiences, they are growing—as the *shikhat* know, the allure of truth and freedom is irresistible.

Epilogue

The work of art and the work of culture is to pave the way for a qualitative practice of the imagination – a practice without which we will have no name, no face and no voice in history.
—Achille Mbembe

The performances and community events of *Voices of Strength* seek to engage audiences in vivid, real-time, spaces of encounter with five extraordinary choreographers and eight exquisite performers. The artists will have travelled across America to share their art and ideas with those who would rarely reciprocate the visit. The encounters across American cities and towns will have been brief but all the more precious for that. These artists will not only sharpen our capacity to perceive, but to imagine anew. Indeed, the decolonization of perceptions, practices, institutions, and histories is a pedagogy far from finished.

The works of Nelisiwe Xaba, Kettly Noël, Gbahihonon Nadia Beugré, Maria Helena Pinto, and Bouchra Ouizguen eclipse the old narrative of Africa. Their new narratives shift victim to agent, two dimensions to three, one view to a multiplicity of views, and stasis to transformation. Upon Kettly’s counsel, and thanks to each of the artists of *Voices of Strength*, we may sense the stir of a profound conceptual shift—as Africa dislodges itself from “the back” to join “the front” of the American imagination.