

DANCE; Finding Movement Everywhere for Tales Of African-Americans

By ANN MURPHY

DURING much of the 1980's, while large segments of the American modern-dance world were exploring semiotic theory, the choreographer Lula Washington was making dances of taut emotion and fierce drama, depicting the deeply nuanced and often painful complexities of the African-American story. In the late 80's the dance world suddenly faced mortal loss and dire hardship brought on by the AIDS epidemic and swiftly plunged back into the depiction of human drama. The need to weave individual tales into an encompassing social and spiritual fabric became overwhelming. Choreographers across the country discovered that "story" was vital to expressing both the extremes of loss and the need to heal, a fact long known in the African-American dance world.

"Stories are such an important aspect of so much African-American expression," Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, a professor of dance at Temple University in Philadelphia, said in a recent telephone interview. "But African-Americans never tell stories as they're pigeonholed as doing. They never tell story in a linear way, but as associative narratives," an often bracing collage of ideas, moods and dramatic expression.

For Ms. Washington, whose 12-member Los Angeles-based Lula Washington Dance Theater performs on Wednesday and next Sunday in its first appearance in the Altogether Different Festival at the Joyce Theater, there is no single tale to tell or uniform approach to story. The 49-year-old choreographer's style is a rich stew of modern dance idioms, African movement and contemporary dance styles sometimes spiced with fragments of ballet. Her dances range from the topical, like "What About Watts?" commissioned by the 1996 Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival, about gang violence -- a searing reality to Ms. Washington after her nephew was shot and killed in the Watts section of Los Angeles -- to the experimental and satirical "L.A. View," which features Hula-Hoops and a dance marathon.

"I try to find movement from all kinds of things," said Ms. Washington, whose credits include dancing with Cher and choreographing "The Little Mermaid," the 1989 animated film. "I look everywhere for movement. I watch the people on the corner. I watch the drunks. I watch. Their bodies are talking. I store the movement, and then I find a place to try and bring it back. I don't want to leave anything out; I want to find all the movements that will help me tell my story. I've always wanted to make total theater, and to me that includes not only movement but facial expressions, the spoken word, song. I tell stories as I see them and try to represent the past, the present and the future -- including the hopes -- through my dance."

Among the four works the company is performing at the Joyce, "Tasting Muddy Waters," which will be seen for only the second time in New York, is a 15-minute solo impression of the life of a Gullah woman from the Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas. There, in the 17th century, escaped slaves found sanctuary, and to this day their descendants have managed to preserve significant fragments of the African language and customs of that time.

Although Ms. Washington created the role for herself, it will be danced by Tamica Washington, her 29-year-old daughter, with Erwin Washington, who is the company director and a playwright. Presented in a series of crystalline moments separated by silence and costume changes that push the narrative forward in time, the central character is a contemporary black woman merging in memory with her slave ancestor. She engages in such modest rituals as hair braiding on a rural porch and then plunges into the horrors of lynching and rape. She turns inward to find the resources to continue and resurfaces as a sassy, proud, life-affirming modern woman. The form of the dance builds through the accumulation of vignettes, Lula Washington explains. Because of the juxtaposition of scenes, the viewer sees a woman who is simultaneously historical, political and, with every performance, different.

"Sometimes I dance it with the woman all one age, sometimes the character ages over the course of the dance," Tamica Washington said, preparing her hair as she moved to the center of the studio space. "Today she's all one age." The music is a medley of blues by Muddy Waters.

In mid-December the 20-year-old company was at the University of California at Irvine campus, 40 miles south of its home base in Watts, rehearsing for its New York appearance. The vast, overbright Southern California sky sparkled through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows in the dance studio. Next door Donald McKayle, a professor of dance at Irvine and one of the venerable American modern-dance choreographers who helped shape the African-American dance tradition, was getting ready to rehearse his 1972 "Songs for the Disinherited," which the Washington company will present on the Joyce program. For Ms. Washington, this dance acts as an important thread of continuity, linking the past with the present, she said, and showing the choreographic shoulders she stands on.

The company will also present the playful "Mahal Songs," an evocation of Hambone, a game Lula Washington played as a child in the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Watts. It is set to the earthy songs of Taj Mahal and ends in a version of a square dance that Ms. Washington calls an urban square dance, that is, the square dance she never got to do. Also on the program is Ms. Washington's "0-1997-8," a wry mating ritual for a man and a woman, accompanied by a driving fusion score by the composer Bob Dale.

At one point during the rehearsal, Ms. Washington interrupts her dancers. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," she says, seeming to have an inner eye on an invisible object as she leaps off her perch to demonstrate the right movements: a lanky-armed splash of limb done in a strong counter-rhythm. Stylistically it is part Merce Cunningham, part West African, part American funk. Emotionally the gesture is strong yet aggrieved, loud but regal, playful but driven. The dancers absorb the nuanced changes and press on.

Ms. Washington, who is the oldest of eight children and the daughter of a Bethlehem Steel worker and a mother who did day work, discovered dance by accident. "We never went to the theater, and I never saw a live dance performance until I was in junior college," she said during rehearsal break, pushing her chair into the sun. "I didn't know that modern dance existed. The only dance I saw was on television on the Carol Burnett Show, where there were two black dancers. That was all I knew about dance."

In junior college, Ms. Washington had a teacher who insisted that students see different dance styles and drove a group to the University of California at Los Angeles to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "I was immediately impressed," Ms. Washington says. "The thing that struck me the most was that there were people of all colors dancing. It was the first time I saw black people on the stage. Before then, there was nothing that told me being on stage was even a possibility. Mr. Ailey made it a reality, something that could really happen. It was a goal I could reach for, and from that moment on I wanted to do what he did."

Ms. Washington entered U.C.L.A. at 22, already married and a mother, with little dance training behind her. But she was driven and a maverick, and found few obstacles that could prevent her from absorbing every influence in her path. Even though she got into trouble for breaking the rules of the dance department along the way, she still sneaked into graduate classes and pioneered the Black Dance Association, a response to having her work rejected for student showcases once too often because, she said, she used music by Aretha Franklin, not Bach or Henry Cowell.

After college, Ms. Washington began to work with Mr. McKayle, who had left New York for Hollywood to work in television. "Lula auditioned for me and I liked her right away," he said. "So I began to use her for different television specials." She eventually joined him in his Inner City Dance Company, and when that folded, Ms. Washington decided to organize her own troupe.

"I was very encouraging when she started a company," Mr. McKayle said. "And whenever she needed anything, I was always there because I felt anyone who could keep a company in Los Angeles deserved a medal."

The Lula Washington Dance Theater is one of only two groups from outside the New York area in the festival, which this year has seven concert programs, including 33 Fainting Spells (from Seattle), Dance by Neil Greenberg, Yoshiko Chuma and the School of Hard Knocks, Sara Pearson/Patrik Widrig and Company, Pascal Rioult Dance Theater and Goldhuber and Latsky. Ms. Washington has been in the Joyce Theater's eye for a long time, said its executive director, Linda Shelton. "When we say Altogether Different we don't mean that it's all cutting edge," Ms. Shelton said. "It's that all the companies are altogether different from one another."

Although inclusion in the festival as well as an \$80,000 grant from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest fund for new work signal growing success for the company, Ms. Washington knows hardship well. The 1992 Los Angeles riots drove students away from the already hardscrabble Watts neighborhood, and the devastating 1994 Northridge earthquake took out the

back wall of the company's building. Mr. Washington says they are still looking for stability after all these years, but Lula Washington is undaunted.

"If you let what you have going in your life fall, then you have two choices," she says. "You either pick it up, get a grip and get on with your life, or you just lie there, waiting for someone to come and pick you up. You decide what your fate is going to be and show what you're made of." It is a conviction that led her to see in Hula-Hoops a comic-tragic expression of the relentless cycle of good times and bad.

"What's great about African-American expressive forms," Ms. Dixon-Gottschild said, "is that they are always up-to-the-minute and reach across the entire diaspora. In fact, we have such a brilliant way of telling our story that it is immediately appropriated by the culture at large or put down by the culture. We've been doing that from the beginning."

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