

Posted on Sat, May. 21, 2011 10:15 PM

## Diversity produces ‘America: Now and Here’ dance concept

By LIBBY HANSSEN  
Special to The Star

A dancer paces the floor in silence while another moves in a slow groove to her own internal music. They both hold American flags, but it’s not coming naturally.

Choreographer Nora Chipaumire notices the awkwardness and offers direction.

“We are seeing you struggle with the flag, the handling of it, so let’s make it part of the work,” she says. “The struggle is good.”

Carrying the flag is a difficult thing for some, co-choreographer and project director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar explains later.

“Who carries the flag?” she asks. “Who has the right? For many African-Americans it’s a conflicted issue. How do you hold up something when you don’t have full rights in the country you were born in?”

Zollar, a Kansas City native and founder of the dance group Urban Bush Women, was in town the last two weeks with a group of international dancers to work on “Visible,” a new piece that explores themes of migration, immigration and what it means to be in America.

The ensemble included five dancers (two of the cast could not attend this residency) and a percussionist/sound engineer. Members came from all over the world: Haiti, Zimbabwe, Burkina-Faso, Japan, Arizona, Missouri and Washington, D.C. They were chosen for this project for their skill as well as diversity. Each has a different body type; they are different ages and from different backgrounds.

This residency served as one piece in the developmental puzzle, a follow-up to their work at Harlem Stage in November 2010. They rehearsed at the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey studio and at the Gregg Klice Community Center, both in the 18th & Vine Jazz District.



JILL TOYOSHIBA | The Kansas City Star

Part of “America: Now and Here” included a demonstration Friday of a work in progress by choreographers Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (above) and Nora Chinaumire.

During their stay they worked to incorporate “embodied local ideas” of Kansas City — Zollar’s personal family history, marching bands and the city’s role in the formation of jazz. Zollar described it as “that feeling of cool is situated here in Kansas City.”

She also incorporated her thoughts on the American dream, that the people of this country recognize its history and all the people who have contributed to it.

“It’s a dynamic and fluid place,” she said. “That would be my dream ... for people to understand that it’s changing.”

Part of the process involved each member’s personal story, brought forth through a multitude of expressions, not only with their bodies, but through narrative, poetry and music. The dancers punctuated their movements with vocalizations and exclamations, both of grief and of joy.

Many of the gestures were personal choices, exploring an interiority that evolved with the piece. At one point, all the dancers were simultaneously relating their stories aloud, creating a cacophony of overlapping languages.

The piece also investigated the mythology of the American dream, what Zollar described as “streets paved with gold.” People have moved to the U.S., and within the U.S., looking for that dream. Zollar’s grandparents were part of the Northern migration of African-Americans from the South, settling in Kansas City. The dancers demonstrate this by gathering, carrying and scattering handfuls of pebbles. Chipaumire reminded them to meticulously and mindfully pick up the stones.

“There is something precious about them, so the picking up and placing down is with a lot of attention,” she said. “You put your baggage, your history, your life, your past, your future down.”

The ensemble showed a sampling of their work in progress at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center on Friday for “America: Now and Here,” a cross-country exhibition by American artists in Kansas City through Saturday.

“Visible” will premiere at Harlem Stage in New York City in October 2011.