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Get to know 'Five First Ladies of Dance'

By Marilyn Jackson
For The Inquirer

What do five 60-plus black women share that has brought them together in a single show?

Answer: All five have been making dance against heavy headwinds for as long as half a century. Each has received honors and accolades, and is still flying high. Yet none is as well known outside dance circles as, say, Judith Jamison or Debbie Allen.



So Georgiana Pickett, executive director of Brooklyn's 651 Arts, in 2009 conceived a show that would give audiences a glimpse of the rich span of dance contributed by these dancer/choreographers for three generations and 50 years. This weekend that show, "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance," comes to the Painted Bride Art Center.

Mikki Shepard and Leonard Goines founded 651 Arts, based in Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, in 1988 to support contemporary performance rooted in the African diaspora. Last year 651's Pickett invited Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bebe Miller, Carmen de Lavallade, and Dianne McIntyre, all African Americans, and Germaine Acogny of Senegal to perform solos in a show now touring the country.

Pickett called it "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance" because "of course we thought of the street-slang *fly* as in cool or in-style, but also these ladies are still in fly-girl shape - you want to look at them," she said. "But then there is actual flying. They're kind of flying above their arduous efforts to survive."

She conceived the piece after seeing Bebe Miller in her last show at Dance Theater Workshop. "Bebe was in the piece, but not a central focus. I really was craving to see more of her physicality on the stage," she said.

"Older dancers start slowly edging out of their work to defer to the capabilities of the younger body. We wanted women who were still active practitioners and not juxtapose them to the younger people in their companies."

The Painted Bride, which this year celebrates its 40th anniversary of presenting works of wide-ranging diversity, partners with 651 Arts in the National Performance Network. "So when we heard about the show at a meeting," said Laurel Raczka, the Bride's executive director, "we saw it as a perfect fit."

As founder (in 1984) and artistic director of the popular troupe Urban Bush Women and an in-demand choreographer, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar is perhaps the best known to contemporary audiences. Her "Fly" solo, *Bring 'Em Home*, is inspired by the post-Katrina displacement New Orleanians.

Zollar and Miller were both born in 1950. Zollar's work is more political: Her *Hands Singing Song*, a 1998 celebration of the Black Power movement, and others will be familiar to Philadanco audiences. Miller's is both minimalist and expressive. She formed Bebe Miller Dance in her native New York in 1985. In 1989, her breakthrough year, the Brooklyn Academy of Music co-commissioned *Allies*, a 35-minute piece that marked her first appearance at the academy's Next Wave festival. On the same program she danced a solo called *Rain*, during which, clad in a red velvet dress, she crawled onto a large patch of real grass and soil. Though critics have cited social commentary, Miller sees the piece, which she reprises for this show, as "a spiritual journey to the interior."

Like Miller, Cleveland-born choreographer Dianne McIntyre, born in 1946, graduated from Ohio State University. Her wide-ranging work includes choreography for the film *Beloved* and HBO's *Miss Evers' Boys* (for which she received an Emmy nomination), and, with her Harlem-based dance/music ensemble Sounds in Motion, collaborations with such avant-garde musicians as Cecil Taylor and the late Max Roach. Olu Dara composed the music for her new "Fly" solo, *If You Don't Know*.

The great Carmen de Lavallade, now 79, who danced in many Broadway shows and films, dances *The Creation*, a classic of African American praise dance based on James Weldon Johnson's poem and choreographed for her in 1972 by her husband, Geoffrey Holder. Holder (remember his vibrant basso voice in the 7-Up "un-cola" campaign?) and de Lavallade married in 1955 and are still active in dance in New York.

The work and personal histories of all of these women intertwine in many ways. In 2008, Zollar and her dancers collaborated with Germaine Acogny (born in 1944) and her all-male Senegalese Compagnie Jant-Bi on the critically acclaimed evening-length *The Scales of Memory*. But Acogny may be best known in the United States for the 2003-04 sensation *Fagaala*, based on the Rwandan genocide, which she choreographed with Kota Yamazaki for Jant-Bi. She and Yamazaki received a Bessie Award for it in 2007.

For "Fly," Acogny has co-choreographed an untitled solo with Pierre Doussaint in which she longs for a powerful female president of an African country. Acogny has given the solo, which includes video by Fred Koenig, as a gift to 651 Arts and the tour.

On Thursday at 7 p.m., dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild will moderate a conversation involving all five "Fly" ladies. Saturday at 6, Dixon Gottschild also will give a preshow talk on her biography-in-progress about Joan Myers Brown, Philadelphia's own first lady of dance.

After its Bride visit, the "Fly" tour, supported in part by the New England Foundation for the Arts, travels to Washington's Kennedy Center, Dance Cleveland, and Newark's NJPac Victoria Theater.

Dance

Fly: Five First

Ladies of Dance

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Painted Bride, 230 Vine St. Sold out. Call 215-925-9914 about availability.