

'Five First Ladies of Dance' preview: Masters of movement team for celebratory tour

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By Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger



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From left, Dianne McIntyre, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Germaine Acogny, Carmen de Lavallade and Bebe Miller are the Five First Ladies of Dance.

Dance legends do not always get along, but the stars who share top billing in "FLY: Five First Ladies of Dance" aren't just exchanging air kisses. The divas in this touring program, which arrives at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center this weekend, are genuinely fond of one another.

They are "really, really fierce," says Georgiana Pickett, the executive director of 651 Arts in Brooklyn, which produced the show. Yet these

remarkable artists — Germaine Acogny, Carmen de Lavallade, Dianne McIntyre, Bebe Miller and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar — share a lifetime of experiences that keep them chuckling and exchanging meaningful looks backstage. Black women of a certain age (60 and up), they put their bodies on the line and faced down the challenges of working in contemporary dance.

"There's a sisterhood there," Pickett says. "There's profound appreciation, and I think they just like being around one another."

"FLY" received its premiere last year. Conceived as a one-night-only event, this evening of show-stopping solos curated by Pickett and Anna Glass was designed to celebrate the 20th anniversary of 651 Arts, an organization dedicated to artists and art forms of the African diaspora.

When the gala was over, however, the performers realized they had a hit on their hands. Pickett says the dancers, despite the difficulty of reconciling their schedules, "really wanted to continue. They are enjoying the synergy." NJPAC is the last stop on their tour. What makes "FLY" work, and keeps the artists from competing, is their diversity. "They know they're all very different," Pickett says.

The show opens with "Rain," a meditative piece in which Miller keeps returning to a small patch of grass that seems to offer a refuge from life's tempests.

Then Acogny disturbs the peace, striding down the aisle and flaunting a feather boa, interrogating the audience and declaring that one day Africa will have a female president. An imposing figure, Acogny is a national treasure in her native Senegal.

"There's this tension between knowing that she could, if she chose, explode into a huge force onstage, but she keeps her movement very specific and within a small range," Pickett says.

McIntyre is another explosive force. In "If You Don't Know Me," this dancer, known for her jazz improvisations, works to live piano accompaniment, paying tribute to three artists who were important influences on her, but did not receive the recognition they deserved.

Zollar, the artistic director of Urban Bush Women, creates her work through community engagement, and her solo "Bring 'Em Home" addresses the unresolved problems of New Orleans residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

De Lavallade concludes the evening with a theatrical tour de force combining dance and spoken text. Inspired by the Biblical story of creation, the solo was choreographed by her husband, Geoffrey Holder.

Although Pickett says she was looking for mature performers with established careers, she was surprised to learn the dancers' birth dates once the "FLY" project was underway.

"There is beauty, power, grace and a lot of information that these women can still give us," Pickett says.

FLY: Five First Ladies of Dance

Where: Victoria Theater at New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark

When: Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sunday at 3 p.m.

How much: \$36-\$39; call (888) 466-5722 or visit njpac.org.

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