

## Dancing ladies take flight in performance at Oberlin College

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By [Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer](#)



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Carmen de Lavallade dances to "The Creation" during rehearsal for "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance," at Oberlin College's Hall Auditorium Friday, December 3, 2010. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)

Spending time with the performers who inhabited the stage Friday at Oberlin College's Hall Auditorium could only be termed an honor. The program was titled "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance," which didn't begin to tell the story.

Make that stories. Each of these artists has been a distinguished contributor to the dance scene for decades, either onstage or behind the creative scenes – or both. They take to the footlights as if they're the finest

of terpsichorean wines, revealing textures and characteristics that continue to deepen.

To watch them in action, mostly performing their own solos, is to witness pages of dance history being turned. Carmen de Lavallade, nearing 80, remains a regal presence, even if she's just standing still. For a blend of buoyancy and spunk, Dianne McIntyre can hardly be surpassed.

It is impossible not to be struck in the gut by the whimsy, resolve and power that Germaine Acogny projects or mesmerized by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's sizzling vitality and Bebe Miller's reflective sensitivity.

The program, presented by DanceCleveland and the Oberlin College and Conservatory Theater and Dance Program, could only provide snapshots of the work these aptly dubbed "first ladies" have been developing throughout their creative lifetimes. But as a glimpse into artistic souls, "Fly" is a knockout.

Presented with slight pauses between selections, the program proceeds with inevitable force from the resilient explorations of Miller's "Rain" to the grand theatrical gestures in the finale, Geoffrey Holder's "The Creation," spoken crisply and danced to the skies by de Lavallade, his wife.

The Miller piece begins in silence as the dancer-choreography moves from vulnerability to a place of calm. She simulates walking, reaches out with yearning hands and circles a patch of grass, in which she ultimately luxuriates. Explosive chants and percussion music by Hearn Gadbois give way to the haunting tranquility of Villa-Lobos' Bachianas Brasilieras No. 5, an ideal sonic odyssey for Miller's hypnotic monologue.

"Yes, we will," announced Acogny as she walked down an aisle of the theater proclaiming the need for more female presidents in Africa. Her "Songook Yaakaar (Facing up to hope)," choreographed with Pierre Doussaint, goes well beyond this charismatic act to become an ode to freedom, complete with narration, film clips and a soloist who applies spellbinding control and thrust to every moment.

McIntyre's "If You Don't Know..." contains audio recordings of beloved departed colleagues singing, discussing the challenges of being a black filmmaker and playing exhilarating jazz. But the magnet is McIntyre, radiant in white, a feather who flutters, floats and fights to do her artistic thing. Her collaborator, pianist George Caldwell, plays Olu Dara's music with polished intensity.

In "Bring 'Em Home," Zollar also commands the stage, rising from a heap and waving handkerchief as if in surrender. Don't be fooled. Zollar, motivated by exuberant New Orleans jazz, is a convulsive and shimmying dynamo, proud to bring this brief masterpiece home.

## PREVIEW

### "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance"

**What:** Solo works performed by Germaine Acogny, Carmen de Lavallade, Dianne McIntyre, Bebe Miller and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

**When:** 8 p.m. today.

**Where:** Oberlin College's Hall Auditorium, 67 N. Main St., Oberlin.

**Tickets:** \$15-\$30. Go to [oberlin.edu/artsguide/tickets/](http://oberlin.edu/artsguide/tickets/) or call 800-371-0178.