

# The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

## Modern-Dance History Times Five, With Plenty of Theatricality



Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Dianne McIntyre in “If You Don’t Know . . .” with George Caldwell.

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NEWARK — It’s slightly astonishing that [“Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance”](#) hasn’t had a longer season in the New York precincts since its premiere at the Kumble Theater in Brooklyn in May of last year. The women of the title are Germaine Acogny, Carmen de Lavallade, Dianne McIntyre, Bebe Miller and [Jawole Willa Jo Zollar](#), all contemporary-dance royalty who direct schools and companies. Seeing them on a program together is like going to a female, modern-dance version of those all-star ballet gatherings like [“Kings of the Dance.”](#) Only interesting.

Part of that interest is that “Fly” is a record of black women in dance over the last several decades. The women range in age from almost 60 to almost 80, and while their solos are mostly new, their dance styles, vocabularies and histories are resonant in every onstage gesture.

But “Fly,” which was performed to a crowded and enthusiastic audience in the [New Jersey Performing Arts Center](#)’s Victoria Theater here on Sunday, is as unabashedly a theatrical event as it is a historical one. It wouldn’t matter if you had absolutely no idea who any of these women were; it’s a straightforwardly great show.

That's not because of the choreography, which mostly takes second place to the drama of performance. Much of Ms. Miller's "Rain" from 1989, set to music by Hearn Gadbois and Heitor Villa-Lobos, takes place on the ground, where she rolls and curls, bends her torso and unfurls her hands like flowers, finally embracing the green refuge of a rectangular grass patch upstage.

She brings a riveting intensity to every small movement, and Ms. Acogny does the same on a larger scale in "Songook Yaakaar (Facing up to hope)." An influential French-Senegalese choreographer, Ms. Acogny is a much-larger-than-life powerhouse whose solo begins with her entrance through the audience, chanting in a solid French accent, "We need more female presidente in the world."

I vote for Ms. Acogny. In "[Songook](#)," which takes a serious turn after playful beginnings, she moves with little bent-kneed walks, slow-motion running steps and subtle contractions of the torso. Her concentration is ferocious, her ability to draw us into her world prodigious.

The other women possess the same compelling interiority: a combination of personal charisma and the artful performance skill that comes from extensive experience. In "If You Don't Know...," the resolutely elegant Ms. McIntyre offers an improvisational, jittery, stamping-legged dance set to music by Olu Dara, played by the pianist George Caldwell, and a recording of St. Clair Bourne.

The text concerns the difficulties facing black filmmakers, and while Ms. McIntyre provides witty physical illustration, her piece never veers into the polemical. Neither does Ms. Zollar's "Bring 'Em Home," in which she moves from exhausted despondency to hip-shaking, tap-footwork joy, the political subtexts of African-American experience remaining quietly nuanced.

Last came Ms. de Lavallade, regal in a long red dress, performing "The Creation," a 1972 solo by her husband, [Geoffrey Holder](#). Set to a poetic reinterpretation of Genesis by James Weldon Johnson, the solo shows Ms. de Lavallade's compelling theatricality and gift for humor, and the gestural beauty of her arms and hands. It's a great ending, but for one quibble: Why exactly would a program celebrating the gifts of these glorious women end with a paean to the creation of man?

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