

# Five First Ladies of Dance at the Kennedy Center Tonight

Posted by **Amanda Abrams** on Nov. 2, 2010 at 10:25 am

There's something incredibly personal about a dance solo performed on an empty stage.

I was reminded of that once again last night, as I watched "[Five First Ladies of Dance](#)" at the Kennedy Center. The show features five long-running and much esteemed female dancers: **Bebe Miller**, **Germain Acogny**, **Dianne McIntyre**, **Jawole Willa Jo Zollar**, and **Carmen de Lavallade**—five performers who have refused to compromise throughout their careers, a friend pointed out. All of them are African American and 60 or older, and each one dances a solo in the show.



I had worried, as I sat down, about not being qualified as a dance critic to report on the performance; someone more knowledgeable might recognize references to older pieces, or be able to quickly untangle the mix of influences in someone's style. After all, these five women have been performing for at least 40 years each; they've deeply contributed to the development of modern dance, and are fully at home onstage and in their bodies.

So you can say I was a bit intimidated. But like all good performances, the show turned out to be the kind you don't need an education to appreciate. While the women had entirely different movement styles and performance qualities, each dancer's style shone through her solo loud and clear—whether playful and low-key, like Miller; unbounded and free, as with McIntyre; or eternally classy and gracious, like de Lavallade.

It was immediately apparent to me, even after just the first piece, that *that's* the benefit of growing older: an increasing strength of character, and the self-acceptance to finally fully express it to the world. At 25, a dancer's personality is still largely unformed, and she isn't necessarily comfortable opening herself to an audience. In contrast, de Lavallade—at 79, the oldest dancer, though she appeared to be at least two decades younger—has been performing for more than 50 years, and had us in the palm of her hand with every regal head turn and perfectly articulated word.

And that's not even touching on the inspiration factor: the relief of watching women in their seventh and eighth decades spin and bend and jump and glide, of realizing that, yes, it's possible to keep moving forever.

The women shone onstage and their openness let us, the audience, in. And really, what more can you ask of a performance than the chance to absorb someone's internal world for just a minute?

It certainly seemed like the audience appreciated it. We climbed the stairs in good spirits, bounded together for that moment in appreciation of the dancers who'd expressed themselves before us.

The show runs again tonight. But if you can't afford a ticket, the Kennedy Center is offering another, more cerebral, way to appreciate art. As part of its "On the Fringe: Eye on Edinburgh" series, the center is hosting "[Eye on Arts Criticism](#)," a free panel discussion on arts criticism at 7 p.m. in the Terrace Gallery. Panelists include **Doug McLennan** of *ArtsJournal*, **Nelson Pressley** from *The Washington Post*, and **Dan Kois**, a contributing writer for *New York* magazine.

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