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DANCE REVIEW

'FLY: Five First Ladies' hold a posture of maturity and grace

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Pity the attendees of Dianne McIntyre's high school reunions. How must they feel when this elegant woman with commanding self-assurance walks into the room, in her mid-60s and as lithe and upright as a dancer?

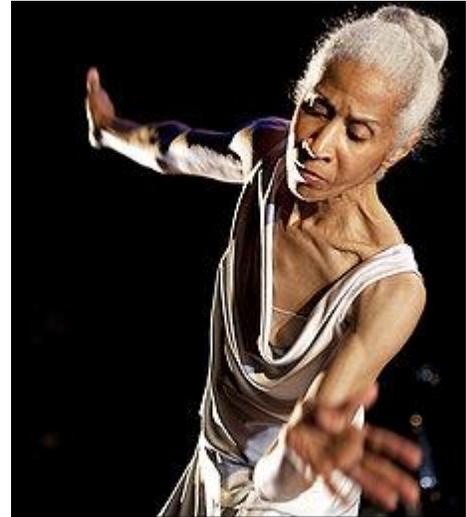
Of course, McIntyre *is* a dancer -- one of the most engaging you'll see anywhere -- and she held the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater audience rapt Monday night in her solo performance, "If You Don't Know . . ."

McIntyre's work formed the centerpiece of an inspiring collection of solos called "FLY: Five First Ladies of Dance." The program, which concluded Tuesday, put five female dancers -- and legends -- in the spotlight, offering a powerful view of maturity (all the women are over 60), mesmerizing presence and urgent, restless will.

This is not new territory for any of these women. Bebe Miller formed an influential touring company in 1985; Jawole Willa Jo Zollar heads the excellent Urban Bush Women, which she also founded in the mid-1980s; Carmen de Lavallade's string of Broadway and dance company turns goes back to the 1950s; McIntyre has choreographed for such troupes as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as well as for Broadway and regional theater; and Germaine Acogny has been promoting dance in Senegal since the 1960s. Each of them created her own solo on the "First Ladies" program, with the exception of de Lavallade, who performed the choreography of her husband, Geoffrey Holder.

Well-intentioned as it is, summing this group up as "fly" is an understatement.

McIntyre is white-haired and thin but built of iron beams inside. At 15 minutes long, her solo was a display of endurance that cycloned her about the stage, arms whirling,



ENDURING STRENGTH: Dianne McIntyre, who is in her 60s, performed a captivating solo. (Antoine Tempe)

legs lunging and propelling her into the air. Her energy was captivating, but especially moving was the thought and depth of feeling behind the movements.

At one point, we hear a voice-over from the late documentary filmmaker St. Clair Bourne, who speaks about his frustration in trying to make films about the black experience when white producers were able to attract much higher resources. McIntyre's physical expression of the inequity and the futile scurrying around that Bourne describes was witty and devastatingly efficient. Pianist George Caldwell provided warm and sympathetic accompaniment.

These women all possess gifts of fierce physical projection, which is what made the evening so fascinating, even if the work was uneven. I relished Miller's serenity and sense of release in "Rain," de Lavallade's riveting dramatic strengths in "The Creation" and Acogny's theatricality and contained forcefulness in "Songook Yaakaar (Facing Up to Hope)," which she choreographed in collaboration with Pierre Doussaint.

"We need more women presidents in all the world! Yes, we can!" Acogny chanted in a thick French accent, as she strode down the aisle swathed in a feather boa. How to refuse her invitation? Before long the whole theater was shouting along with her.

Zollar's work, "Bring 'Em Home," was quieter, more economical -- and a stunner. At first, Zollar lay on the stage in an exhausted heap, hardly moving but for the white cloth she was waving, wearily, like a dish towel or a flag of surrender. Hot jazz, in a recording by the Rebirth Brass Band, created a jaunty mood, and Zollar soon responded, rising and pumping her feet to the beat, the white scrap in her hands now a cheery blur.

I loved the shifts in tone, shading from fatigue to comic lightness to, perhaps, even a bit of hysteria -- until the funereal, no-nonsense crack of a snare drum took over. As she marched offstage, Zollar called out the work's title to us, over her shoulder. It was exquisitely simple, an artist's sketch, a woman's plea -- and it squeezed your heart.

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