

## Dance

## U of M Dance students challenge stereotypes of "black dance"

By Sheila Regan, Fri., Dec. 10 2010 @ 12:00PM

Categories: **Dance**

This fall, the University of Minnesota's dance department has been examining the stereotypes of what "black dance" means, and exploring the possibilities of the work of female African American choreographers working in different contexts.

This October, the department held a **symposium** which featured keynote lectures by Awam Amkpa, who discussed contemporary dances from Africa, and Thomas DeFrantz, who offered a genealogy of radical black dance artists, beginning with those such as Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, and Edna Guy, and leading up to artists such as Dianne McIntyre, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Bebe Miller.



Photo by V. Paul Virtucio

The department also hosted three-week residencies with three different black women choreographers who represent very different aesthetics and who come from very different cultural backgrounds. Urban Bush Women's Jawole Willa Jo Zollar is African American with roots from the South, Nora Chipaumire is from Zimbabwe, and Makeda Thomas is from Trinidad. The visiting artists offered the students a range of work, methodologies of composition, and technical/stylistic idiosyncrasies according to Department Director Ananya Chatterjea. For the residencies, the artists taught technique classes, ran rehearsals, led a brown bag lunch discussion with students, and taught a community class, which is typical of Cowles artist residencies, Chatterjea says.

For their annual dance concert *Continuously Rich: Dance Revolutions 2010*, University dance students will perform a restaging of Zollar's masterwork "Walking with Pearl... Southern Diaries," a 2006 Bessie Award-winning piece created in honor of African American dance pioneer and activist Pearl Primus. They'll also perform a re-envisioned version of Nora Chipaumire's work "Dark Swan" and an interpretation of Michel Fokine's "Dying Swan" ballet, which was originally created as a solo for an African woman but for this concert is to be performed by an ensemble of dancers. The students will also perform in a remounting of the piece "A Sense of Place" by choreographer Makeda Thomas, derived from a series of conversations with women living with HIV/AIDS in Mozambique.

"As faculty, we make every attempt in our pedagogy and through our curricula to transform student perceptions about static and monolithic notions of 'blackness,'" Chatterjea says. "What these

residencies and this concert is allowing us to do is demonstrate these ideas more powerfully to our students: They are taking on these artists' visions onto their bodies, and working hard to be true to the visions of artists that they so enjoyed working with." In the end, Chatterjea believes the statement is about appreciating and valuing cultural difference.

The theme of this year's concert and residencies fit in with Chatterjea's artistic work and research. "My lifelong work has been to engage women of color," she states. She also says that a 6-level track in African diasporic movement has been consolidated this year for interested students.

*Continuously Rich: Dance Revolutions 2010* will be performed December 10 through 12 at the Southern Theater (1491 Washington Ave. S., Minneapolis). Tickets are \$12 students, \$22 for adults. For more info, visit [www.southerntheater.org](http://www.southerntheater.org).

©2010 City Pages, LLC.