nora chipaumire
portrait of myself as my ~~father~~

What the Critics are Saying…

"A no-holds-barred look at masculinity in African culture and the African male body in American culture." - *The New York Times* (listing)

"(A) fascinating, messy, entangling work. The woman that is onstage, embodying the man she would like her father to have been, is fierce enough for you to adore, even as you wonder whether you'd dare to meet her face to face." - *DanceBeat*, ArtsJournal.com

"Ms. Chipaumire, who gives herself the power of the microphone, delivers a booming manifesto — "the African must be freed from the African" — and asks: "How do you become a man? A black man? A black African man?" Offering a 10-step process — "learn to swag," "make it look natural," "slow way down" — she critiques stereotypes by magnifying them. (...) Dizzying and Dense..." - *The New York Times* (Siobhan Burke)

"*[portrait…]* is an exercise in engaging the audience in an almost primitive way." - *The Montclair Times*

About nora chipaumire's Miriam *(2012)…*

"Chipaumire has become a rock star of downtown dance, with a majestic quality that blows everything else out of the water." – *Dance Magazine*

"Ms. Chipaumire is an artist of ferocious intensity" – *The New York Times*

"*Miriam* seeks both to capture the darkness associated with Africa and to undress baroque Western fears of the continent. Miriam does that and more." – *Willamette Week*

"Chipaumire presents herself—a woman heroic in scale, fearless, thrilling in intensity—as an embodiment of (iconic women's) power and sense of mission." – *DanceBeat*

By the time *Miriam* concludes, in a blaze of light, you will have visited the place of the ancestral and archetypical Intensities—desire, fear, shame, jealousy, anger. In other words, it is a hair-raising journey through the usually hidden end of the spectrum. "
– *The Infinite Body*

"Much of Chipaumire's power stems from her intensity and integrity as a performer. She's a riveting figure, a theatrical warrior, with her dramatically expressive face and fleshy, muscular limbs, stomping and prowling and transforming the stage into a freighted, separate universe that seemed to vibrate with feeling. 'She has so many bodies in one body,' mused one watcher." –*The Miami Herald*

The New York Times
Dance Preview

Nora Chipaumire Explores Identity in the Boxing Ring

By SIOBHAN BURKE
APRIL 6, 2016

Nora Chipaumire, left, and Shamar Wayne Watt in "Afro Promo #1: Kinglady."
CreditGennadi Novash

As part of her research for "*Portrait of Myself as My Father,"* the Zimbabwe-born choreographer Nora Chipaumire learned to box, or at least picked up a few tips. In the new work, presented by Montclair State University's Peak Performances series, she explores African masculinity and the black male body with a boxing ring as her stage and the Senegalese performer Pape Ibrahima Ndiaye, better known as Kaolack, as her opponent. Their relationship, while tangled — and further complicated by a third performer, Shamar Wayne Watt — is not just about winning or losing. A magnetic dancer and audacious thinker, Ms. Chipaumire is less interested in binaries than in the spectra along which we negotiate identity. Adding to this complex look at heritage, gender, language, religion and power, Ms. Chipaumire offers a new film, "Afro Promo #1: Kinglady," created at Montclair State. (April 14- 17, Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair, N.J.; peakperfs.org.)

A version of this article appears in print on April 10, 2016, on page AR4 of the New York edition with the headline: Dance; Exploring Identity in the Boxing Ring. Order Reprints| Today's Paper|Subscribe

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APRIL 14, 2016
LAST UPDATED: THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2016, 1:25 PM

Nora Chipaumire premieres adventurous dance program at Montclair State

BY BOB CANNON
STAFF WRITER | THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

"I know how to be in a black body," said dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire, "but I don't know what it is to be inside a black male body."

Nevertheless, the Zimbabwe-born performer makes that dramatic leap when she brings the world premiere of her dance piece "portrait of myself as my father" to Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University tonight at 7:30 p.m. The premiere continues on Friday, April 15, at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, April 16, at 8 p.m., and Sunday, April 17, at 3 p.m. Tickets are available at the box office, at peakperfs.org, or by calling 973-655-6112.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS CAMERON

Nora Chipaumire will premiere her provocative dance piece 'portrait of myself as my father' and her film 'Afro Promo #1: Kinglady' tonight in Montclair State University's Peak Performances series at Alexander Kasser Theater.

"Portrait of myself as my father" takes place in a simulated boxing ring in which Chipaumire and Senegalese performer Kaolack are tethered together in a physically and emotionally exhausting duet. They are then joined by Shamar Watt, who plays the coach/corner man/cheerleader.

The piece is an unflinching assessment of Africa and the black man, and how he has endured cultural upheaval, colonialism, Christianity and the struggle to achieve liberation. Along the way, Chipaumire addresses the question of what it is about the black male body that the world often finds challenging and frightening.

"I have been working around this theme of the sacrificial lamb," explained Chipaumire. "I did an early piece called 'Rite Riot,' in which I placed myself as the black African female performer, in a box - almost like those mannequins in a window display. I was looking at the performer as the person who is sacrificed.

"I knew I wanted to do something that accompanied that piece, looking at how the father is the man in the family, and the importance that is placed on the man who has so much responsibility. So I thought, 'This is how we sacrifice the man in this institution called the family.'"

And how does she explain the boxing ring? "I am so attached to Muhammad Ali," she said, "I started looking at 'Where do black men hold the imagination?' And the only place where they do that, without any doubt, is in sports. So I had the

image of the sports arena where the black man can be the superhero.

"So the boxing ring is one place where you can actually discuss violent commoditization, as well as the complicity of the onlooker. The audience is as complicit in the match as much as any spectator sport. It gave me a way to talk about bigger things, like the relationship between Africa and Europe, the process of colonization and the creation of the worker, then the commoditization of labor and the annihilation and the decimation of the African man and the African family."

Chipaumire is also premiering her short film "Afro Promo #1: Kinglady," which addresses male roles in somewhat lighter terms. "I'm looking at how men are globally," she said, "so I started asking questions like 'Where are the black superheroes? Are there any black superheroes?'

"My father was a rural schoolteacher, and he died very young. But that's not the whole story that I want to talk about - I would like to have had a father that was a superhero, who is cool like Richard Roundtree in 'Shaft.'"

After a night of intense messages, Chipaumire plans on finishing up the evening with a dance party featuring steamy African electronic dance music, spun by acclaimed DJ Rupture [Jace Clayton].

For Chipaumire, the program is an exercise in engaging the audience in an almost primitive way. "I want them to be going, 'Wow, I have not seen anything like that. This is amazing.' I want people to kinesthetically, both from the film and the stage, feel the power of the human body, which is innate in all of us. And to have the ability to reflect on what does it mean to be alive.

"It's live art," she said simply. "It's in the moment. It's really a stretch of the imagination, and happily, theater is about stretching the imagination."

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The New York Times
Dance Review

A Dizzying and Dense ‘Portrait’ From Nora Chipaumire

By SIOBHAN BURKE
APRIL 18, 2016

From left, Shamar Watt, Nora Chipaumire and Pape Ibrahima N’diaye in “Portrait of Myself as My Father.” CreditGennadi Novash

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Toward the end of Nora Chipaumire’s “Portrait of Myself as My Father” on Saturday, the dancer Shamar Watt stood face to face with Ms. Chipaumire, who was carrying a third performer, Pape Ibrahima N’diaye, on her back. “What is this about?” Mr. Watt asked, to which Ms. Chipaumire replied, “It is about my father, Webster Barnabas Chipaumire.”

That might seem evident from the title. But at this point in Ms. Chipaumire’s dense, turbulent dance-theater work, which had its premiere as part of the Peak Performances series at Montclair State University here, a reminder was helpful. Having dizzied and disoriented us, Ms. Chipaumire gave us a steadying hand, drawing a clear line into her past.

Born in Zimbabwe, Ms. Chipaumire, who lives in New York, has often explored African female identity in her work. In “Portrait,” she turns to black African masculinity, guided by questions, as she explained in a postshow talk, about a man she barely knew. (In the title, the word “father” is crossed out.)

Her stage is a boxing ring, which she designed along with the attractively incongruous costumes: athletic shoulder pads and low-slung pants for herself; rope-bound briefs for Mr. N’diaye, who goes by

the name Kaolack; a tailcoat and track pants for Mr. Watt, who plays a kind of stagehand, or as he put it, a shadow. Not only are Ms. Chipaumire and Kaolack confined to the ring, with all its associations with black manhood, but they're also rigged to the rafters by elastic bands. The bands don't hinder their occasional hip-swiveling dances, but they do suggest that exiting is not an option.

The characters don't fight, not in any obvious sense, but pressure builds on Kaolack as it would on a champion athlete. The stakes, though, are higher. Ms. Chipaumire, who gives herself the power of the microphone, delivers a booming manifesto — "the African must be freed from the African" — and asks: "How do you become a man? A black man? A black African man?" Offering a 10-step process — "learn to swag," "make it look natural," "slow way down" — she critiques stereotypes by magnifying them.

While "Portrait" sometimes slips into murky disarray, it also achieves chillingly sudden shifts in mood, from joking and light to excruciatingly dark. It ends somewhere in between with "Afro Promo #1: Kinglady," a psychedelic short film in which Ms. Chipaumire, blowing kisses into the camera, proposes becoming "a black African man-woman superhero." With that, she looks to the future.

A version of this review appears in print on April 20, 2016, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: Drawing a Line Back to the Past.

Nora Chipaumire raises her fists in ‘Portrait of myself as my father’

By: ROBERT JOHNSON | April 15, 2016

The fighters never make it past Round One in the high-stakes boxing match in which choreographer Nora Chipaumire made her debut in Montclair State University’s Peak Performances series, on Thursday. The bell rings frantically at times, and an exhausted fighter may sink wearily to the floor. Yet no one is knocked out and, significantly, there is no decision in this sweaty battle where manhood is the prize.

PHOTOS BY GENNADI NOVASH

Nora Chipaumire in “Portrait of myself as my father,” which is at the Kasser Theater at Montclair State University through April 17, as part of the Peak Performances series.

Chipaumire herself remains clearly undefeated, even nonplussed, as she swaggers through the ruckus onstage in “Portrait of myself as my father,” a dance-theater piece in which this Zimbabwean artist represents her father’s life as a bloody struggle with racism.

The choreographer’s father, Webster Barnabas Chipaumire, died in 1980, but by brandishing a sign that says “Round One” the choreographer lets us know the fight has only begun. “Run, nigga!” someone yells provocatively; and one of the dancers, Pape Ibrahima N’diaye (aka Kaolack), tries desperately to flee, loudly pulling down the makeshift ring as he throws himself into the ropes.

But Nora Chipaumire isn’t running anywhere. Only once does she permit herself to make a strategic retreat, in a scene where the power goes out and we hear bursts of gunfire and bombs exploding. Standing on a chair that increases her naturally imposing stature, she wears a football player’s shoulder pads and gazes out imperiously. Her shadow towers on the screen behind her.

Perhaps the clearest sign of this artist’s courage is her willingness to laugh at the stereotypes that her piece recalls. “Ho, ho, oh, ho!” she exclaims with relish, when she isn’t growling like a lion or muttering in French. “Allez, ça bouge!” (“Now things are moving!”), she declares with satisfaction. It takes courage, too, for a woman to enter this particular ring, boldly claiming the right to wear her father’s mantle even while critiquing masculinity.

Although “Portrait” is a loving tribute to a man whom she barely knew, but whose troubles arouse her sympathy, Chipaumire isn’t above poking fun at male pretensions. The bare-chested Kaolack first appears lounging in his corner, a lamp aimed at his glittering crotch. When he rises, he may adopt a graceful, feminine stance, as well as hunkering down in fighting mode.

Chipaumire compliments him on his beauty, but she also taunts him. “Champion!” she says, “Show us your moves!” When he shrinks away from her, Chipaumire laughs and calls him “a pussy.”

The other man in this show, Shamar Watt, portrays the ringmaster, frantically dashing to-and-fro and hissing instructions that Chipaumire may or may not decide to heed.

Shamar Watt and Nora Chipaumire in "Portrait of Myself as a Father."

Words are essential to this multi-faceted work, which Chipaumire defines by asking and then answering the telescoping question, "How do you become a man? A black man? A black, African man?" The dancing involves a few carefully chosen moves and gestures — Chipaumire skittering in place with small, rapid steps; Kaolack twisting his hips sharply and slapping himself, or stalking in slow motion. Though powerful, these characters seem half-frozen, and viewers may get the impression they are walking through a minefield, where any move they make could be misinterpreted or turned against them. The colonialists demanded that Africans renounce their swagger, Chipaumire tells us; and in a world where Africans must "earn the right to human dignity" only a few essential movements seem necessary to own.

As a pendant to this live premiere, Chipaumire offers the film "Afro Promo #1 Kinglady," the latest production in Montclair's "Dance for Film on Location" series, and a collaboration among Chipaumire, director of photography Benjamin Seth Wolf and editor Alla Kavgan. Here the question asked is "How do you become an African superhero?", and the answer is obvious. Chipaumire enters a realm of luminosity and saturated color, blowing kisses through a round aperture that frames her beautiful face in close-up and surrounds it with a dazzling golden halo. Sweating alongside Watt in full-screen shots, she emphasizes fluid upper body moves; and as they prance in a tight corner, a patterned curtain billows gently in the background. Feet in winged sneakers swing back-and-forth like pendulums, running in a superhero Olympics.

The set-up couldn't be simpler, but these artists transform it into a magical world.

"Portrait of myself as my father" is at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, April 15 at 7:30 p.m., April 16 at 8 p.m. and April 17 at 3 p.m. Visit peakperfs.org (http://peakperfs.org) .

DanceBeat
Deborah Jowitt on bodies in motion

an artsJOURNAL blog

Embodying The Erased Father

April 20, 2016 by Deborah Jowitt

Nora Chipaumire premieres a new work at Montclair State University's Peak Performances.

Nora Chipaumire's *portrait of myself as my* . (L to R): Shamar Watt, Nora Chipaumire, and Pape Ibrahima N'diaye. Photo: Gennadi Novash

You go out to Montclair State University to attend the world premiere of Nora Chipaumire's *portrait of myself as my ~~father~~* on Peak Peformances' 2015-2016 season, and note that Spring is greening the lawns. The immense construction machines that are ripping up turf and erecting buildings sit brooding and silent. Students in black-and-white clothing politely usher you to your seat in the Alexander Kasser Theater.

And then all hell breaks loose. Before long, virtual shards will be flying around, labeled “kinship,” “racism,” “colonialism.” “empowerment,” and more. For now, a hulking figure of indeterminate gender stands on a platform confronting us. A towel covers its head, football pads protect its shoulders; its belly is bare above baggy gray pants; it wears sneakers. It grunts and growls and mutters to itself as late-comers take their seats, then, in a deep, accented voice, advises us to turn off our cell phones and refrain from taking photographs.

This is a clue to what may follow: humor and irony will creep in under violence, under anger. As the lights brighten, it’s clear that the stage has become an arena for prizefighting, although its defining ropes are elastic white tapes, and other tapes and cords—mostly black—lie or hang in unruly ways. Chairs for the contenders in two corners are bright red. On one of these is slumped a man, legs spraddled, foregrounding what looks like a very large zipper securing his black trunks. He looks as if he’s just finished a round and is waiting for someone to bring him water and rub his muscles. This is Pape Ibrahima N’diaye (aka Kaolack). That someone could be (but isn’t) Shamar Watt. He, too, is dressed crazily; an unbuttoned black tailcoat atop green sweatpants, a gold headband confining a nest of tiny dreadlocks. Over the course of *portrait of myself as my ~~father~~*, Watt will function as a kind of stage manager, moving and rearranging floor spotlights and echoing or supporting the action.

This is what you might call a postmodern stew. We hear English spoken (in soft voices or strident ones), also French, Wolof from Kaolack’s birthplace in Sénégal, and Shona from Chipaumire’s native Zimbabwe. Fragmentation is key. The music and sound score created by Philip White unsteadies us.

Shamar Watt and Nora Chipaumire. At back, Pape Ibrahama M’diaye (aka Kaolack). Photo: Gennadi Novash

After a while, it becomes evident that there is to be no fighting between the performers. They punch the air and the shadows within it—among them the shadows that might deny a black African male his power, his voice. Chipaumire knew her father, Webster Barnabas Chipaumire, only in the years leading up to her fifth birthday, and he died in 1980 at the age of 42. She has re-fashioned him as champion athlete and boxer—a Muhammed Ali, if you will, but the strike-through of his name in the title suggests his effacement as a man and a father. In her printed statement, she says, “I have given him boxing gloves so that he has a fighting chance. I have put him in a boxing ring to do battle with himself, his shadow, his ancestors, the industrial gods, and that merciless tyrant: progress.”

From time to time, Watt holds up a sign announcing “Round One.” Round Two never arrives. At times, a bell sounds—usually the handbell that Watt brandishes and sometimes can’t stop ringing. Sometimes Kaolack is sinuous in his strength, whipping his hips around, undulating his muscular torso; once Chipaumire taunts him, calls him a sissy. It doesn’t take long to realize that some of the cords run up to high offstage anchorage, but some connect Kaolack and Chipaumire. This umbellical bond that crosses the gender barrier is almost as prone to tangling as the real thing. Kaolack rises from a squat and begins a wide-legged walk in a circle, while Chipaumire holds and gathers in the rope that bonds them; like a ringmaster exercising a horse, she decides how much slack, if any, he can be given. Fierce as he is, he ends up running in place.

Pape Ibrahima N’diaye (aka Kaolack) in Nora Chipaumire’s *portrait of myself as my father*. Chipaumire at back. Photo; Gennadi Novash

Later, she tells him “Ah, you’re beautiful!” and takes a selfie, saying almost under her breath, “brought to you by iPhone.”

Chipaumire avoids what audience might label as “dancing,” but she and the men do dance—stamp and clap rhythmically, make their torsos look elastic, adopt aggressive stances, assume solid balances, lunge, kick. They’re primed to stand proud, but ready to hunker down in a defensive stance. Once, Watt enters the action with a gigantic leap; he looks as if he were crossing a river in a single bound. They also talk, goad one another, or argue. Questions are asked of no one (or us). “How do you become a man?” “How do you become a black man?” “How do you become a black African man?” Advice is given: “You better know how to fuck” and “You better know how to die.”

There are cataclysms of sound and light. Once, these mimic a power out, with all its crackling blackness. Suddenly—I forget just when—one of the men rushes at the side rail and stretches it beyond its supposed limit, causing disarray among the other binding and defining barriers.
At the end of this fascinating, messy, entangling work, Chipaumire walks slowly around carrying Kaolack piggyback. “What is this about? Watt asks her. Her only answer is the name “Webster Barnabas Chipaumire” and the sentence, “I carry the carcass of my father.”

(L to R): Shamar Watt, Nora Chipaumire, and Pape Ibrahima N’diaye in *portrait of myself as my father*. Photo: Gennadi Novash

portrait of myself as my ~~father~~ is followed by a masterful short film, *Afro Promo #1 Kinglady.* This was produced at Montclair State through its Office of Arts and Cultural

Programming, one of whose components is Dance for Film on Location at MSU (a project of the Andrew Mellon Foundation's Choreographers on Campus Initiative). Chipaumire directed and choreographed the film, with Benjamin Seth Wolf as Director of Photography and Alla Kavgan as Editor. The soundscore is taken from *Music for Merce*, an anthology related to Cunningham Events that includes work by such composers as Takehisa Kosugi and Christian Wolff.
Here Chipaumire takes a slightly lighter swing at what she'd have the black man she has embodied, encouraged, and castigated onstage be up for. He needs instruction on how on how to swagger, she tells us, and how to become a super hero. Watt is in the film with her—more or less in the background, although the camera shows us a close-up of two pairs of feet in red sneakers dancing with bold abandon. Chipaumire's handsome face, sometimes framed in a glowing circle within the rectangular frame, spits out the words as if she were chewing them up for us. She also dances in a small "room" whose walls—by turns yellow, red, or blue—are light-weight, minimally moving, fabric with tiny flowers on it (Art Director: Peter Born). It's daintiness contrasts smartly with her sensual ferocity.

The woman that she is onstage, embodying the man she would like her father to have been, is fierce enough for you to adore, even as you wonder whether you'd dare to meet her face to face.

Nora Chipaumire, from the film *Afro Promo #1 Kinglady*

5 things I know for sure

BODY IN MOTION: Chipaumire, 2012.

Nora Chipaumire

The award-winning Zimbabwean-born modern dancer and choreographer, whose daring new piece, *Miriam*, is touring the country this spring, describes how she translates ideas into movement.

1 ***My medium is my body.*** I'm interested in theories of performance that explore what's possible with just a performer and an empty space, in which a lot is created with very little. In dance, you have only your body. You have to create a physical language to express yourself.

2 ***Exercise is the best cure for nerves.*** Before a performance, I run, lift weights, walk if there's no gym, swim if there's a pool. The exertion creates just enough fatigue that I am calm but still energized enough to perform.

3 ***Leadership sometimes means eating humble pie.*** As a choreographer, I direct people to work in tandem. If a dancer and I are at odds, the piece can fall apart. So I do what is necessary—like apologizing even if I think I'm right.

4 ***I'm terrified—and it works.*** I am afraid of not being able to express myself, of failure, of disappointing my mother. So I work. I immerse myself in art history. I study the writings of great artists like Samuel Beckett and Peter Brook. Seeing how other people worked out their own creative issues frees me up to begin to resolve my own.

5 ***A teacher can change everything.*** In 1998, I moved to the Bay Area and, by chance, ended up in a modern dance class at a local community college. The teacher was so passionate that she inspired me to pursue formal training at Mills College, where I studied with choreographers who helped me translate my experience, my history, into movement.

—As told to Naomi Barr

how I do it

MAKING A SCENE

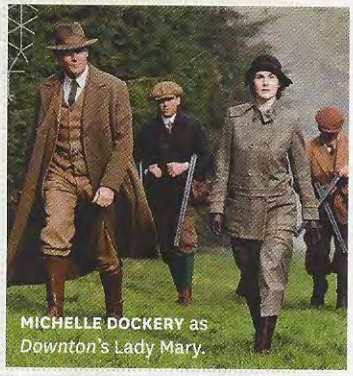
Julian Fellowes, creator of *Downton Abbey* (its hotly anticipated third season is now airing on PBS), explains how he keeps his creative juices flowing.

Years ago, after I left Cambridge and went to drama school, my friends who were going on to lead sane lives in banking or the army thought I was crazy. I had to stop seeing them and instead surround myself with people who believed I was talented and that it was all going to happen for me.

There are days when I realize I'm writing rubbish. But my solution is not to not write. I plan a plot structure, and usually the writer's block passes.

One thing I don't believe in is constantly going back over what I've done. Editing my scripts seems to be fruitful only once I've reached the end—when I have the broad strokes, the big picture. If I'm constantly going over what I wrote last Tuesday, it's difficult to actually finish it.

When I've exhausted my general fizz, I'll write the title of the next scene: "Dining Room, Day." I think it's a mistake to stop working without a clue as to what comes next.



MICHELLE DOCKERY as *Downton's* Lady Mary.

DANCE MAGAZINE®

Nora Chipaumire in *Miriam*

Nora Chipaumire

- **Independent choreographer; born in Zimbabwe**
- **Known for her fiercely political work and powerful rooted physique**
- **New York City**

Interviewed by Siobhan Burke

The work that I'm doing right now, *Miriam*, is partly looking at Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the way Conrad shapes the images of women in his novel. I am trying to rebuke what has been a longstanding tradition, a very imperialistic, Victorian point of view of the body. If a white woman's body was not important, then the African body was even less important—but a necessary body in that it was a place where you could project all of the things you couldn't do in your proper, civilized, mannered Victorian self.

Africa becomes also a symbol for woman as the unknown. That idea—of woman being this unknown territory upon which all things can be projected, and how women can own that—intrigues me. I have this unknown body, this historical baggage: How can I use that as a weapon, then?

That imperialistic point of view has given me a powerful place to start. I feel like the possibilities are endless: Somebody has said that this is a vast darkness; nobody knows what's going to emerge. There is an expectation of violence, of sex. How can the female body—my body—take those stereotypes and use them to reshape what femininity is, what woman is, what the African body is, what Africa is? I feel like I am doing a very small thing, using my body to chip away at big ideas that have been around for so long.

In my solo *Dark Swan*, my retake on *The Dying Swan*, I feel like I was able to turn a very recognizable idea on its head. Most theater-going people in the West know the Saint-Saëns music and have associations with it, from Pavlova to all the great ballerinas who have danced it. And then there I am, playing with this stereotype of the African woman, sort of buck naked, running around on a zebra or something. I have a tutu but I am bare-breasted, dancing to this classical music. I would say my body is not the dancerly type—I'm not tall, thin, wafer-like, whatever. I'm just a really regular body. So to impose my physicality and my aesthetic onto this very classical notion, along with a humility and humanity that I'm going for, I think often has been very jarring and subversive.

These things are interesting to me: the power of history, of ideas, how they are carried in the body, and how the female body can subvert a lot of these big ideas. Because historically there has been so little expected of the woman's body other than beauty.

Current projects: *Miriam* is touring the U.S. and France through July 2013.

The New York Times

Dance

Bearing Burdens of the Ages, In Darkness and in Light

By Brian Seibert
Published: September 11, 2012

Photo Credit: Andrea Mohin
Nora Chipaumire's new dance work, "Miriam," has its premiere at BAM Fisher on Wednesday.

Nora Chipaumire is powerful. Nora Chipaumire is strong, imposing, ferocious. So reviewers of this choreographer and dancer have been pointing out for at least a decade, since she gained prominence as a member of Urban Bush Women. Who could not notice her muscular physique and the deep rivers of energy she can make flow and surge through it? Who would not be impressed by her sculptural head and the arresting face that can stare down an audience?

The work of Nora Chipaumire (pronounced chip-aw-MEE-ray) is dark, heavy. Thematically, the dances that she has made since leaving Urban Bush Women in 2008 often confront the troubled history of her native Zimbabwe, from which she's been in self-exile since 1989. They express anger, resistance, revolt. They poke at stereotypes of Africa and the black female body.
Often the darkness is sensory, the stage lighting dim. Most of the dancing in her 2010 work "lions will roar…" took place behind an obfuscating scrim.

Yet on a recent afternoon while discussing her latest project, "Miriam," which has its New York premiere on Wednesday in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's new Fishman Space, Ms. Chipaumire was all smiles. Her big laugh rang through one of her favorite hangouts in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, an establishment run by South African immigrants: Nunu Chocolates.
Perhaps the setting accounted for her levity; perhaps, less straightforwardly, the dance's subject did. The idea for "Miriam" came after the 2008 death of the South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba. "I was struck dumb," Ms. Chipaumire said. "Makeba was the music we would hear in our homes. She was part of the air that I breathed."

The sudden loss of such a figure, known throughout the world as Mama Africa, got Ms. Chipaumire thinking about longevity and influence. She was intrigued by the similarities of Makeba's life to her own — Makeba as a girl, an African girl, leaving her family, living in exile for 30 years — and also the differences.

"Makeba had this calm, elegant, almost childlike innocence," Ms. Chipaumire said. "This beautiful face, smiling. This lightness. Is that the way to success? To be nonthreatening?"

Reflections on grace and femininity led to what she calls another icon, “the most megastar ever,” the Virgin Mary. (There was also an etymological track: the name Mary is derived from the Hebrew name Miriam.) Just as Mary did not choose to be the mother of Jesus, Ms. Chipaumire said she realized, so Makeba did not set out to be Mama Africa; she just wanted to be a singer and stop cleaning houses before apartheid and the South African government got in the way. “But once the burdens were thrust upon them,” Ms. Chipaumire said of both women, “they accepted them with an elegance that seems — more than admirable — incredible.”

Ms. Chipaumire dug into Makeba’s life. “The parts that we saw projected in public, I think were genuine and true,” she said. “But there was also a part, as with anybody else, that you don’t show to the public.”

Predictably, “Miriam” darkened. Ms. Chipaumire ventured into “Heart of Darkness,” Joseph Conrad’s 1902 novella about barbarism, moral hypocrisy and the corrupting force of colonialism. She read about the African woman on the riverbank: the consort of the rogue European ivory trader, Kurtz. “What would that woman say?” Ms. Chipaumire asked. “What would Makeba have said, had she been free to say what she really thought behind that smile?”

In “Miriam” Ms. Chipaumire gives voice to those imaginings in spoken text, grunts, ululation and dance. Conrad’s exoticized description of the woman is repeated, too, through a megaphone and sometimes garbled to underline colonial incomprehension.

But Ms. Chipaumire isn’t alone onstage. She is joined by Okwui Okpokwasili, who is also physically striking, intense and African, though not in the same way. (Ms. Okpokwasili’s parents are Nigerian, but she was born in the Bronx.) “Miriam” is, in Ms. Chipaumire’s words, “a solo for two people.”

“Okwui helps me embody different personalities who are really the same person,” she said. That person isn’t Miriam Makeba exactly, and viewers of workshop showings of “Miriam” complained to Ms. Chipaumire that they couldn’t find Makeba at all. Fans might notice a subtle nod to that singer’s shamanic breathing, but Omar Sosa’s score, which runs from dense percussion to ruminative electric piano, refers to Bach’s music but not Makeba’s.

Ms. Chipaumire met Mr. Sosa, originally from Cuba, in the Bay Area in the late 1990s, when she was studying at Mills College, getting her first formal training in dance. “Omar was a catalyst in teaching me the Cuban way, which is to accept that you’re African and European,” she said.
Ms. Chipaumire begins the dance underneath a pile of stones, trying to make the emotional burdens more apparent, more physical. The costumes are heavily weighted, and Ms. Chipaumire, at 47, has set herself a test of stamina like never before.

To Ms. Okpokwasili, who started as a dramaturge on the project before becoming a performer, that weight was exciting and challenging, she said in a phone interview. “I would go easier on myself,” she said. “But Nora has such incredible control of her body. And she embraces mystery in a way that I find so compelling.”

The lighting and set designer Olivier Clausse wanted “Miriam” to be bright. He failed entirely to persuade Ms. Chipaumire. The installationlike set instead honors something both creators admire in African creativity, the ability to recycle ordinary materials into beauty. The materials include bare light bulbs, plastic, rubber, police tape.

“It’s sort of a crime scene and sort of a sacred site,” Ms. Chipaumire said. “You’re never quite sure which.”
“Those sorts of spaces aren’t brightly lit,” she continued. “The darkness has to do with fear, with the unknown.” Though at BAM “Miriam” is performed up close and in the round, spectators have to work to see, much less understand.

“Yes!” Ms. Chipaumire said, laughing. “I love to make the audience work! And why shouldn’t they? I’m asking you to smell, to hear, to feel, to become complicit.”

“Miriam” runs from Wednesday through Saturday at the BAM Fisher’s Fishman Space, 321 Ashland Place, near Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100, bam.org.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/arts/dance/nora-chipaumires-dance-about-miriam-makeba-comes-to-bam.html?ref=arts&_r=1&

Portland Monthly Magazine

Culturephile

eyes on the black body

TBA Day 3: Nora Chipaumire Talk

Zimbabwean-born dancer Chipaumire talks about being an African artist, dealing with the black body, and her performance, *Miriam*, which will have its final showing tonight.

Published Sep 8, 2012 at 3:16 pm | Updated Sep 11, 2012 at 4:49 pm
By Aaron Scott

New York-based, Zimbabwean-born dancer **Nora Chipaumire**'s *Miriam* takes its name and inspiration from the Virgin Mary, the sister of Moses, and the South African singer and icon Miriam Makeba. I wasn't able to make Chipaumire's performance last night but I did just sit in on her conversation with (artistic director Angela) Mattox at the PICA office. Much of the conversation focused on the experience of being identified as an "African artist." Here are some of the highlights:

On falling in love with modern dance upon moving to American, but then having to reconcile it with her African heritage.
I immediately fell in love with modern dance. American modern dance to me, the pioneers—Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey—they just spoke to me. Everything they were talking about landed so well on my body and psyche. This is the thing I want to do [takes on the affected voice of an artiste]: explore my inner landscape.

I am not American. I have citizenship and live here, but I'm not of American history and geography. I'm Shona—Zimbabwe. How can I impose that on this thing called modern dance that's been created by women? It was a huge tension for me: how can I embody all this stuff and still be honest to myself. I got quickly involved with African American dance companies. But there, too, I began to understand that I was clearly not of this huge world called "black" [laughs]. I had to be really careful not to just adopt. Perhaps what I needed to do is adapt, but I couldn't adopt over certain things of my being. So the question of how can I be in this form called "the dance" and be Nora Chipaumire from Zimbabwe is an issue that underlines all my works and I carry personally in everything I do.

On the category of "African," which ignores the immense diversity of the continent, and being identified as an "African artist."
I am Shona, I am Zimbabwean, I am African. I think when you live in America like I do, it becomes necessary to claim that, because otherwise I'm a "black artist," and what is that? It's another box that has pluses and minuses. I think the Africaness is not something I want to make excuses about. It's a reality. What I'm interested in is the work. Everyone is affected by where they come from. Martha Graham was in search of America. The West seems to forget. You take it for granted, and it's the "other" who has to stake and prove who they are. I'm not interested in fighting that battle over and over. I'm not going to change. I am African, and I make work, and it must live in this international world and it must meet those standards. That standard is not less for African artists. It's the same standard for anyone, any self-respecting person with a creative imagination. If I were any lesser, you wouldn't have me here. I don't think the art world works on pity, or aid. It's a brutal world.

On making work that's not just responsive to western ideas:
Part of having been colonized is to always be doubting one's self worth. It's a constant struggle. But I want to make work that my grandmother would understand.

On the creation of *Miriam*:
The seed of it was planted in my heart and head and body when I heard that Miriam Makeba had died. I had taken her as this icon that would always be there, like Gandhi. It was more about ideas than the physical body, so I suddenly realized she was human and could die.

I started thinking about what does that mean to sustain a life of art, and as an African girl coming from an African family that's probably more traditional than mine. I was thinking how much it took for her to become Makeba. With that kind of stature, there was a price to pay. I was really curious about that. But I didn't want to do another "Fela" type thing, even though Makeba has a very good story…it's ripe for Broadway. But I wanted to honor the way women deal with issues, especially women who also happen to be in the public eye. This special burden that Makeba carried: she was Mother African. Did she ask for this?

That led me to the Virgin Mary. What are the requirements of women? What is the way of femininity? I've always been met with "[Makeba's] fierce, she's strong, she's angry, she's an angry black woman." That's part of the baggage I have, and I can be angry too [laughs].

So Virgin Mary led me to Moses' sister, who sang and danced and led a rebellion. It led me to these Miriams. Makeba had to be obstinate to sustain herself through the ups and downs and burdens of being Mama Africa. In that, there's this biblical thing, Makeba was in exile for 30 years, kind of like Moses wandering in the desert for 40 years.

It's really fascinating because I've lived out of Zimbabwe for almost 20 years and there's a huge guilt I feel about that. Clearly there're others that don't have the privilege to leave Zimbabwe. There's the question of what is lost and what is gained? It's the burden of freedom: I have the freedom to do my work, but I have huge anxiety about my mother and family that live in Zimbabwe.

On dealing with the black body:
I grew up thinking that the only bodies that were worthwhile had blond hair and looked like Wonder Woman. There's something about trying to come to terms with my own body as a daily reality—coming to terms with my own body and certain other powers that exert themselves. You would think people who are in the public gaze have to deal with that quite often. Makeba had to deal with that when she grew older and fatter.

The black body is in the trenches. It's a body that we think we've come to terms with, and yet it continues to have questions and tensions. I think the African black female body has been less addressed in art…I think the African female body is completely invisible, so I'm trying to bring it a certain visibility with it's inherent tensions and questions and insecurities too. Not just as a mother: Mama Africa, but not as a sex symbol. [But there's] very few exceptions, like Imam, that matter.

On the impact of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*:
I had the experience to go up the Congo River and see what Joseph Conrad experienced. It was nothing; it was just a river! It's much more developed clearly than when he was there. His manner with language—Joseph Conrad brought up so many images. There're shadows that he talks about. I wanted to capture that feeling of the darkness…The heart of darkness, which implies a fear. Clearly Joseph Conrad was undone and done at the same time. "Whoa, savages!" There was something of trying to address the Baroqueness, the fears, the whole Belgian expedition into the heart of darkness, and trying to then capture light. The whole thing we fear about Africa—the unknown. We can go on safaris and have fun, but the people are "other." I wanted to deal with that.

On the elements of ritual in *Miriam*:
I describe it as both a ritual and a crime scene. So whichever one gets you to the right space. I think there're a lot of clues, too, in the sound score, because Omar [Sosa, the composer], too, is very much invested in spiritual practices. What you do miss unfortunately with the proscenium stage is a clear comprehension of how the space is designed in this ritualistic way. If you're closer to it, you're able to decipher certain things in it, or not, in the round with the four points. And what that means to anybody, it's up to you what that means, but it's not wrong to think of it as a ritual.

Read the full article:
http://www.portlandmonthlymag.com/arts-and-entertainment/culturephile-portland-arts/articles/tba-day-3-nora-chipaumire-talk-september-2012

A BEAST IN A JUNGLE

Okwui Okpokwasili and Nora Chipaumire in Miriam. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

MIRIAM(S)

By John Marcher
February 15, 2014

The lives of Miriam Makeba, the South African singer, and Miriam from the books of Exodus and Numbers share some loose parallels: exiles, prophets of a kind, afflicted with disease, and aided by prominent people during a time of need. Both women cast long shadows over Nora Chipaumire's *Miriam,* which delves deeply into the darkest corners of the each of their stories for inspiration . What's fascinating about the piece is how Chipaumire (pronounced chip-aw-*mee*-ray) manages to illuminate these dark places while submerging the audience into them.

It's easy to miss that the performance begins the moment the audience enters the dimly-lit room. In the center of the floor, separated by yellow police tape and surrounded with what appears to randomly strewn junk and rocks, rests a pile of stones. The audience can't see that there's a human being underneath it.

The stones aren't lit- the only light comes from inside a gallon-sized plastic water bottle suspended from the ceiling. It looks like a mash-up of an archeological dig and a crime scene. People come in, find seats, and then chatter quietly. They check their phones, and chatter some more. One might notice the sound of water drops coming from speakers. Ten minutes past the starting time, nothing has happened. The audience apparently is waiting for any latecomers to arrive since there is no late seating and anyone who exits once the performance starts will not be allowed back in.

The lights go down, the room is cast into darkness. Stomping footsteps come from a corner of the room. A disembodied voice joins the water drops, then suddenly it's a chorus of voices. I can pick out individual words but can't make out what any of the voices are saying. It's confusing.

In the program notes Chipaumire says the work is about manifestations and states of *otherness.* I think of what it would be like to the person standing among a crowd, understanding only pieces of what's taking place around me, without any context. I've been in that situation, but it was a long time ago. Now I'm reminded of what it felt like, and that every day there are probably millions of people of who experience that feeling of dislocation. I was a tourist in the Middle East when it happened to me, so it was my choice. For many it's not.

Dim light starts to filter through the room and only then do I notice a leg is protruding from the pile of stones, straight into the air. I have no idea if the leg was visible the entire time, or if it silently pushed its way out through the stones while I wasn't looking. Already I feel as if I'm missing the obvious, the humanity right in front of my eyes I fail to notice. Here is where collisions start to take place in my head.

To arrive at the venue on time I walked straight down Ellis Street through the Tenderloin. Past the junkies, their garbage all over the sidewalks, people standing in the streets because they can't bear to stay cooped-up in their shitty SROs. They scream, they yell, they act out scenes from imaginary plays taking place in their minds. They kneel on all fours searching a tiny piece of rock to smoke. These people are the most pathetic to me, and I want to ask them if that search, which I've seen played out more times than I can remember, has ever yielded anything or if it's just something one does by habit once crack has taken them down to the point where you don't even realize you're living like a feral animal, crawling on the ground, looking for scraps. My own reaction to these people is conflicted: I despise them, knowing that my lack of empathy reflects something empty and lacking in myself.

And now Chipaumire has emerged from the stones and is crawling about the floor in a way the reminds me of them- grunting, screeching, laughing, talking gibberish, moving in a way that's more simian than human. She's moving toward the stomper, who is now perched on a ladder with something resembling wings or a halo protruding from her back, and after what seems like forever Chipaumire stands boldly, twisted and pulsating, and grunts a word I've heard directed at me too many times before by people who appear just like she does at this moment:
"Cigarette?"

The stomper looks at her with a disdain I recognize all too well and throws a cigarette at her. It lands on the ground. The stomper laughs from her perch, a mocking, derisive denial of the humanity standing in front of her. Chipaumire repeats the requests. Another cackle. Another toss. Another request. And another, and another, and then the stomper empties the pack onto the floor.

Over the next hour, Chipaumire and Okwui Okpokwasili (at various moments as the stomper, doppleganger, antagonist, other half, friend and more) stalk, mock, threaten, ignore, embrace, question, reflect, mirror, and finally, befriend each other. Okpokwasili, tall and sinewy, moving like a preying panther, barks lines from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through a bullhorn while prowling around the perimeter of the floor like she's Kurtz's interior nightmare made flesh. At another point she sings, with a beautiful, disarmingly clear voice, appropos of what I don't know, but she's arresting. Chipaumire disrobes, only to put on something else- a garment conveying elegance and chaos in equal measure, and then puts on a pair of boots like those Okpokwasili is wearing, speaking to herself as if she were just handed the most marvelous gift in the world, "Shoes… I have shoes," in a coy, amazed, girlish voice.

Miriam isn't dance; it's more of a statement made through movement and sound. Music by Omar Sosa fills in spaces, at times overwhelmingly so, only to disappear, or be overtaken, by Chipaumire and Okpokwasili's words, screams, grunts, and laughter. Chipaumire has packed a lot of ideas into the work. How the viewer unpacks them is a question she seems unconcerned about, confident that she's given us something both bitter and sweet to chew on and digest. And she has.

Eric Ting directs, costumes by Naoko Nagata and Malika Mihoubi, lighting and set design by Olivier Clausse. More information here. Performances at YBCA February 13-15, part of the 2014 Black Choreographers Festival.

http://abeastinajungle.com/tag/nora-chipaumire/

Hopbrooklyn's Blog

It's your community business

Nora Chipaumire sensualizes African Dance

Sept 21, 2012

Okwui Okpokwasili and Nora Chipaumire. Photo by Antoine Tempe

Nora Chipaumire body contorted, wine, bent and flowed to the spirit of Africa in pure eroticism.

It was quite an evening September 13 at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) Fisher.
As a first time viewer of Chipaumire, I honestly did not know what to expect. It was quite different from your normal African dance, it was raw and dark. It was more than a dance. It was an expression of what the African continent has overcome and suffered over the years. Miriam, composed by Omar Sosa and perform by Chipaumire and Okpokwasili essentially was based on Miriam Makeba the singer but also Miriam of the Bible. It certainly was one of those performances that challenges you to see things differently. I did not expect the raw sexuality in the dance. Nor the several references to the "White man" during the portrayal of a police raid in apartheid South Africa. I felt the pain, the jubilation, the insecurity and revolt in the dance. And the sound of stones, water and speech that calm or jolt the senses. In a post show interview, Chipaumire said there is nothing the body cannot say that words can say – the body is stronger and can express more quickly.

Africa, the whole continent of Africa was a crime scene she said. And in Miriam she decided to address that. And even though her power is limited in the changes that she can bring. Chipaumire said, "I can try and change the very intimate space around."
Well done Chipaumire and I look forward to more.

http://hopbrooklyn.wordpress.com/2012/09/21/nora-chipaumire-sensualizes-african-dance/

The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

The Heart of Darkness To the Soul of Defiance

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

"Miriam": Okwui Okpokwasili, left, and Nora Chipaumire in this new work, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The piece invokes, among other things, the South African singer Miriam Makeba and Joseph Conrad.

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

Published: September 13, 2012

Like so many dances Nora Chipaumire's "Miriam" begins in darkness, so that you hear the actions onstage before you see them. Viewers dutifully sit, letting these aural mysteries wash over them, waiting for a fuller picture to emerge.

It never comes. Though "Miriam," which had its New York premiere on Wednesday night, is housed in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's diminutive new Fishman Space, with spectators seated on four sides just steps away from the performance, it still requires its watchers to lean in. And even then things are murky, half-seen at best or glimpsed through the haze of lights shining back out at the audience. (Olivier Clausse designed the lighting and the object-heavy and industrial set, full of repurposed elements like yellow caution tape.)

For Ms. Chipaumire (pronounced chip-aw-MEE-ray), a Zimbabwean-born and New York-based artist who has long sought to complicate traditional and stereotypical images of African women, obfuscation as strategy is nothing new. There is often a sense in her dances of withholding. You can get glimpses of me, she seems to keep reminding the audience, but please don't mistake these fragments for a graspable whole. This is an understandable strategy (and a common one for artists in this manic age), but it is also limiting. If the ground underneath you is always shifting and uncertain, you typically take smaller steps.

In "Miriam," which is directed by Eric Ting and features live percussive and electronic music by the Cuban composer Omar Sosa, Ms. Chipaumire is joined by another enigmatic force, Okwui Okpokwasili, who functions as both interrogator and doppelgänger. Both women are striking, imposing figures, especially when decked out in tall platform boots and spiraling, fabric-festooned appendages. (Malika Mihoubi designed the accessories, Naoko Nagata the delicate yet roughly tailored shifts and skirts.) The performers push their bodies through deep squats, undulations and hunched, thrusting attacks, in a movement palette both oblique and aggressive.

Ms. Chipaumire begins buried under a pile of stones and a voluminous trash-bag-like cloak. She emerges slowly, with effort, as if simultaneously hatching and giving birth. She vocalizes with breathy screeches

that veer between innocence and something more knowing, at times sexual; throaty chuckles and girlish laughs and spoken phrases that underline an awareness of an other's gaze: "I should always remember to smile," and "I am happy, I sing, I dance."

Ms. Chipaumire might be the "I" in these declarations. So is the beloved South African singer Miriam Makeba, an activist known as Mama Africa — and so too is the Virgin Mary, whose name is related to the Hebrew Miriam. Ms. Chipaumire's stirring vocalizations continue throughout the hourlong work, echoing Makeba's gorgeous muscular use of her voice and veering into restive, guttural and even hostile territory.

This range of sounds is evocative yet never quite locatable. But when Christian prayers come in, or when Ms. Okpokwasili, wielding a megaphone, quotes Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" on the "savage and superb" African lover of the European trader Kurtz, the audience is presented with an instantly identifiable and scathing critique. Here is the colonial view of Africa, thrumming with sexual exoticism, reflected back on itself to damning effect by an African woman.

Is it too identifiable to have power? It's an interesting political question, particularly when art is the vehicle for these politics. For me, yes — I'm bored with it, and then I'm bored with, and troubled by, my boredom. What a thing to feel dismissive of!

But "Miriam," with its absurdly dim lighting and pacing that rockets forward in strangled fits and starts, isn't especially interested in seducing, or even in making nice. "Smile, smile, we calm," Ms. Okpokwasili advises toward the end, breaking from the hypnotic, repetitive diagonal that she and Ms. Chipaumire had been traversing.

Ms. Chipaumire doesn't smile. She doesn't stop. She isn't interested in being dismissed.

"Miriam" runs through Saturday at Fishman Space in BAM Fisher, 321 Ashland Place, near Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100, bam.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on September 14, 2012, on page C12 of the New York edition with the headline: The Heart of Darkness To the Soul of Defiance.

The Boston Globe

Theater & art

In ‘Miriam,’ Nora Chipaumire considers Africa and women

By Janine Parker
March 14, 2013

Nora Chipaumire says that “Miriam” is darkly lit because she wants to give the audience a sense of the uncertainties of exile.

Photo Credit: Olivier Clausse

Though the Zimbabwe- born dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire has been working and living in America for years, her native land, its people, and its politics are often central in her art. Her 2012 dance “Miriam” is, in part, an investigation of assumptions and stereotypes about Africa, as well as those of the female body. The piece considers contradictory expectations of women in general. In particular, it contemplates the South African musician and anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba — whose death, in 2008, planted the seed for “Miriam” — and the Virgin Mary, whose name, in Hebrew, is also Miriam. Makeba was ultimately exiled from South Africa for 30 years, whereas Chipaumire chooses to live in what she calls self-exile. While she feels that the geographical separation helps her to better understand herself, she is also seeking to, as she said, “politicize” her situation: “I think it is vital to keep Zimbabwe always in the consciousness of people who care.”

The two Miriams are main threads in Chipaumire’s provocative, sometimes cryptic work of ritual and searching. The lighting design is purposely dim to the point of murky, and the set of found or repurposed objects scattered about the stage creates a world that is part crime scene, part bacchanal. Excerpts from various texts — shouted out or whispered through a megaphone by the other performer in the piece, Okwui Okpokwasili — is punctuated by Chipaumire’s vocalizations, which range from childish coos to hair-raising shrieks. Last week from California, Chipaumire spoke about the work, which comes to the Institute of Contemporary Art Friday and Saturday.

Q. “Miriam” was originally conceived and designed to be performed in the round. Why was this an important aspect of the piece’s overall design, and how will you approach the fact that the ICA stage cannot be reconfigured this way?

A. In the round, the audience is 2 feet away from the performance and therefore they are absolutely inside the psyche of the piece. That proximity can be a real experiential thing that you will then not have from the proscenium setting. But we do want the piece to be [performed] in Boston, and I do think the proscenium [enables] you to look at a piece and see all of the designs from a distance — so it has its own beauty for sure. I’ve performed at the ICA before; it provides me with an interesting advantage in that it’s a house of art. To be placed alongside the collections of the museum — even if only for a blink, even if only for a short time — it’s an exquisite honor for me.

Q. Because “Miriam” is so darkly lit, viewers cannot always see exactly what’s happening. Would you explain why you wanted this deliberate obscurity?

A. I’m interested in the audience-performer relationship: What are our responsibilities? I think my responsibility is to make a strong work. But what is your responsibility as the seer? When you’re in the dark, you’re not unseeing, unhearing, unfeeling — you have a kind of awareness. I want the audience to

use everything to understand this work. In so doing, it helps bring the audience closer to understanding what it's like to be in this exiled place, in this fault line, what it's like to be living with uncertainties.

Q. Even so, do you weigh how much context an audience may need in order not to feel alienated?

A. I think with all of these "post-talks" and "pre-talks," especially in dance, there is a certain sense that the audience is being overfed. It does us all such a disservice. There's this nagging assumption that [audiences] don't understand what [the artist] is saying. But what is it that makes you understand a painting? I've created this environment where there's a lot of sensory stuff happening, where you are asked to feel, and feeling is fact. It is a way of knowing. I'm very comfortable in doing these small, chamber-like works that maybe are not easy to understand, but I'm working out certain issues, both for myself and for what is my place in the world. I would like for people to love the work, but I'm also happy if they come away having been provoked into "I don't really love it, but I hadn't thought about that," and maybe the work grows on them.

Q. Why did you choose to live, as you call it, in "self-exile"?

A. I guess naively, I was looking for another way to understand myself, to give myself distance to see what it was I was dealing with. I think there is something in that condition of exile that allows for another [way of] thinking. You say to children, "Don't touch the fire because you're going to get burned," but they only understand that when they've actually gotten burned. So I'm putting myself into the fire just so I can understand.

Q. Would you talk about some of the dualities that you've thought about or explored, within the two main "characters" in this piece, Miriam Makeba and the Virgin Mary?

A. Makeba had her own personal dilemmas. Many things happened to her that were completely devastating, and yet her public presence was always with this soft, sweet voice . . . so childlike, so innocent. That sweetness is an alluring, seductive thing — it is a power — and it seems to me that that is [something] that women are expected to carry all the time, and it is very like the sweetness that is perpetually that of the Virgin Mary. She is forever untouched, sweet, innocent. The ideals that the world wants of women — to be both mother and virgin — what a horrible contradiction! So I have questions about what does a woman really need to do to succeed? [Does she need] to inhabit those spaces of innocence? And yet, it seems to me that the world is not an innocent place.

Q. Your vocalizations throughout "Miriam" seem representative of those extremes, from ululations of joy to deep grunts that suggest an unearthly agony.

A. Why [shouldn't] those deep guttural grunts of sheer terror, the darkness of it, be also available to women? I think that [to some people] I have always been perceived as somewhat masculine, and aggressive perhaps. I don't know if it's an "angry black woman" myth. I'm not angry at all! [Laughs.] I'm just — alive, and passionate about many, many things.

http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2013/03/14/miriam-dancer-choreographer-nora-chipaumire-considers-africa-and-women/cOblIng4K9dR6b8Ix2gZiM/story.html

Miami Herald

Performing Arts

Choreographer Nora Chipaumire brings dark vision of singer Miriam Makeba to Miami

By Jordan Levin
Friday, January 23, 2014

"Miriam" Okwui Okpokwasili, left, and Nora Chipaumire. Antoine Tempe

Miriam Makeba's music was part of life's soundtrack when Nora Chipaumire was growing up in Zimbabwe in the 1970s and '80s. But the dancer-choreographer had never thought much about the revered singer until she died in 2008, and was startled to find herself deeply shaken.

"What that made me realize is she had become an icon," says Chipaumire, 48. "I guess I didn't realize how much she meant to me until they announced she was dead."

That moment inspired the dance theater piece Miriam, which Chipaumire, an acclaimed New York-based choreographer, will perform this weekend at the Miami Light Project's Wynwood performance space, sponsored by Miami Light and Miami Dade College's MDC Live Arts.

Raised in Johannesburg by a poor single mother, Makeba left South Africa in 1959 after her appearance in an anti-apartheid documentary led to a trip to the Venice Film Festival. She spent 30 years in exile for her opposition to the South African regime, becoming as famous as an emblem of human rights as she was as an artist. She suffered a fatal heart attack at a concert in Italy while singing Pata Pata, her first and biggest hit.

Also raised by a struggling single mother, Chipaumire has been motivated by political activism since she endured the bitter civil war in which Zimbabwean revolutionaries (among them her aunts) overthrew the country's racist colonial government.

Miriam is not a literal biography. Instead, Chipaumire uses the singer's life to invoke issues that inspire her dance theater work: what she sees as oppressive and insidious Western stereotypes of mysterious, sexualized black women, and of Africa as a savage, irredeemably conflicted place.

She felt a personal connection to Makeba as an artist sustaining herself and her artistry in exile.
"I understand what it's like to live away from home, but I have [done] that by choice and she had no choice," says Chipaumire, who was 23 when she came to the United States in 1989. "That touched me profoundly.

"Also her being a person who lives from the fruits of her imagination, how difficult that is. How do you keep yourself anchored in what is culturally true to you, but how do you also keep exploring? Her stature just grew in my mind."

Part of Makeba's allure was her exoticism; she often sang traditional music (another of her hits was The Click Song, in her father's Xhosa language) and wore traditional African robes and headdresses. She became Mama Africa, an earth-mother emblem.

But when she married black-power advocate Stokely Carmichael in 1968, she was blacklisted by the music industry, her tours and record deals canceled. The experience drove her to live for 15 years in Guinea, a country she championed. She suffered a backlash as president Ahmed Sekou Toure's regime became
corrupt and dictatorial — a similar trajectory to that of Zimbabwe's revolutionary leader Robert Mugabe.

Makeba's story has renewed resonance in the wake of South African leader Nelson Mandela's death and the focus it brought to the contradictions that can arise between the image of revered figures and their human failings.

Makeba had her share of troubles. She was married five times, lost her only daughter in 1985 and was an alcoholic. But when, in the course of Chipaumire's research, a filmmaker who had worked with Makeba told her the singer was "mean, angry, she hated white people, she could not trust anybody," she was deeply upset. "I held her on such a pedestal. I didn't want to hear she could have a mean streak."
The discovery forced Chipaumire away from what might have been a worshipful piece toward one that is figuratively and literally darker. Miriam is so dimly lit that the audience sometimes has to struggle to see.
"I am very keen on this dark hue as a way to explain where I and Makeba come from," Chipaumire says. "The darkness in that space is a way for me to get at an emotional and psychological space for myself and the audience.

"It seemed to me that those were the conundrums she was dealing with — the expectations about Africa, the stereotypes of what a black woman is — and those are some of the conundrums I deal with.
"There is something that vexes us all about Africa as this unknowable place. Maybe we want it to be unknowable. Maybe Makeba has to be this beacon of light."

The piece is her first to include another performer, Nigerian-American Okwui Okpokwasili. The score is by Omar Sosa, because Chipaumire felt the Cuban-born musician understood "the idea of being unanchored, of being exiled in the world, what it's like to make home your work, so the music is your home."

That complexity, as well as Chipaumire's charisma and her use of African traditional dance to create an original, intensely physical dance language, have made her one of the more compelling figures in contemporary dance, says Georgiana Pickett, who as director of 651 Arts in Brooklyn, sponsored Chipaumire's first solo works.

"She's thinking in a very big way," says Picket, now executive director of the Baryshnikov Arts Center. "She's uncompromising. She's completely committed to very intellectual and political ideas. But she's using her body, her physicality. … She's not spoon-feeding anyone. Miriam might be one of the most opaque and murky pieces she's made. In a way you're searching the stage for the meaning, for the dance, so it's an interesting metaphor."

When Miami Light presented Chipaumire two years ago in a show that included an excerpt from Miriam, audiences were both captivated and confused, says executive director Beth Boone.
"She demands something of you. She's grappling with such deep issues and themes … and she's pushing physical limits. I think she's an artist who defines riveting."

Chipaumire is looking forward to her return to Miami, where she taught a monthlong choreographic workshop last summer for Miami Dade College. She hopes audiences here will instinctively understand Makeba.

"Miami is the home of the immigrant, and everybody knows there's a dark side to that," she says. "But there's also a beautiful courage. I wanted Miriam to speak to courage, beauty, and also the loss."

http://www.miamiherald.com/2014/01/23/3884327/choreographer-nora-chipaumire.html#storylink=cpy

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"BECOMING INVISIBLE IN PUBLIC" AN INTERVIEW WITH NORA CHIPAUMIRE

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 19:50

Photo: Antoine Tempe

Nora Chipaumire is at the forefront of contemporary dance. She is a 2008 New York Dance and Performance (aka "Bessie") Award winner for her choreographic work Chimurenga; and a 2007 New York Dance and Performance Award in the performance category for her work with Urban Bush Women where she also served as Associate Artistic Director. Nora studied dance formally and informally in her native Zimbabwe, Senegal, USA, Cuba, and Jamaica. She is a graduate of the University of Zimbabwe's School of Law and holds graduate degrees from Mills College of Oakland, CA in dance (MA) and choreography & performance (MFA). She is also a fellow at Anna Deavere Smith Works.

Ethan Philbrick (Anna Deavere Smith Works Curatorial Assistant) and Chipaumire recently sat down for a conversation about her work following her performance of The Last Heifer at Danspace in Manhattan. Check out the interview below:

Ethan Philbrick: I was thinking that we could start off with the artist statement that's on your website. Could I ask you to read it out loud?

Nora Chipaumire: Okay. Here goes…"My goal is to move people to action. My work is about people. The work is total propaganda, unapologetic agitations for human rights"—that's true—"my work is township. It is urban. It is now. It is not about that colonial, post-colonial, geo-political Africa. It is about the African people agitating for fair trade and not aid."
It's so interesting…the language is so within a time frame, you know…"revolution," "propaganda…"
In a way, it's….well, now I'm already talking…do you have a question?

E: No, no, no, keep going, keep going!

N: In a way, it seems that this language of revolution is such a reality for me. There's still this thing. Right? And it's still sort of real. And somehow, yeah, this language still rings true, although I'm also interested now in how…
...how can I find language that means the same thing, but doesn't have the echoes of, you know, the Berlin Wall, DMZs, and stuff like this? Although those things…I also have this fear that somehow, as time is speeding past, people are totally forgetting that there was this other reality. You know?

E: Definitely. What do you mean when you say that "it is not about that colonial, post-colonial, geo-political Africa"?

N: Well you know, it seems like that's how people, especially in academic settings, there is this academic sort of approach and people want to place it in this way of thinking—you know, like, "what's the philosophy? It's post-colonial"—and those are fantastic things, and they're also true, it is the era, but in a way, they are such big subjects and they lessen the individual reality. To me they sort of take away from some of the grander achievements of ordinary people in townships, you know, who are negotiating this massive shift from the rural or traditional (but not rejecting their tradition), into this urban, technological, tweeting and texting sort of place. There's a lot of innovation there that gets swept under the carpet when we just focus on this huge colonial narrative. In a way, that's the thing…what's the language to get away from the master-servant, colonial-colonized? I'm less and less interested in that sort of dialogue. If you just focus on what's happening, the material there is so alive and also so empowering. How do you take back the power and come away…step away from being the victim. So I think some of this post-colonial academic language has this sort of, "oh the poor African, the victim." It's just endless, and yet, it's like, that's not how I want to feel and that's not how I feel and that's not what I see when I see all these interesting art works that are made out of wire, out of plastic, out of things that are cheap, attainable, accessible. People are really being creative. How they survive is totally creative.

E: I think we may pick back up on these things later, but I'll jump into another broad question now. As we are talking about language…for you, what is the relationship between language and movement, the word and the body?

N: The body is capable of expressing so much. It's not just because I dance, but it may have a lot to do with the culture that I come from where there are such codes of comportment, especially for women. So you always know how to organize your body and you're taught this from the very beginning, and that speaks volume. So I have this sort of love for that too, that organization of the body, and what it says and how people who are in my specific culture understand it. If you walk a certain way, and sit a certain way, and shift a certain way—it has meaning. It has nothing to do with words. Or they are words that are unsaid. It's interesting…how to constantly be finessing the vocabulary of the non-spoken thing, because also then it helps me as a choreography and dancer. But it's interesting living and working in the "West" and having this grounding in this other culture and trying to negotiate—who am I speaking to? Who am I trying to be in dialogue with? How can I use what's from there and what's happening here, physically? It's fascinating to me…

E: When I was reading your artist statement from your website, the first phrase: "my goal is to move people to action," reads to me as an articulation of your approach to spectatorship. How do you conceptualize audiences or spectators as you go about making a piece?

N: That's a good one. I do think that I don't consider the audience at first because I'm working alone in a studio and I'm just trying to find language—what does this mean? Is it clear to me? So once it starts being clear to me, then there's the engagement with a space. There are all these different levels. The language, the vocabulary, needs to be strung together, there's this physical thing, then there's another physical thing with space. So once it starts to get away from my very sort of navel-gazing-with-the-body-thing, and into the space-thing, then I start to be aware of orientation in the space—is this warm? Cold? Proximity? Intimacy? Is it distant? Where are people sitting? I have two things that I always work with. One is that, dancing alone primarily, I always place people in the space with me. I populate the space, you know, like with my grandmother, or my mother, or my brother, my sisters. These people are who I am talking to. It's sort of my way of dealing with…you know…I'm making this work for me, and looking towards Africa, but I'm not performing there, so I place these people in the space. And then there's also this other outer circle, which is the actual audience which is sitting there. So there's an intimate audience that I see in my mind's eye and I'm talking to, and working with, and negotiating with, and then there's this other audience. This other audience, I feel a little hostile to. There's a bit of a hostility that I think is helpful for me, because I don't really trust these people, I don't know these people, I don't know what they're bringing, how they're going to take me. I want to press enough buttons so that they're not asleep, so that in a way, I guess that's what I mean by "move them to action"—even if it's just thinking about something, or looking up a certain idea or something, to

me that's enough action, rather than "oh that was nice, what's next" and totally forgetting that they ever saw your performance. But I do think in general that I find Western audiences hostile, because the general culture is to stand back and applaud at the end and not really engage. I mean I'm sure people are engaging, but not in the same way that say, an African audience would be physically there. I mean I guess Western audiences at sporting events…but that's a kind of spectatorship that I would really love to have, where people are so engaged with it that everything is at stake for them, so they're going to push you, challenge you, prod you, dance with you, you know? But in the concert setting, because it's an elite kind of thing, you go, you sit, then you applaud and say "that was very nice." So I guess in a way, I'm interested in agitating that space too, and bringing a township edge to that space. In the township, people will talk to you, and that's really kinetic right? It's alive. It's almost like comedians…they know when it's working, when it's not. It's a constant exchange, it's alive. I don't know. I'm so interested in that edgy place where it's alive, where it could fail, where it could succeed, and you know it.

E: I want to talk to you about your recent piece, The Last Heifer, which premiered at Danspace as part of Ishmael Houston-Jones's Platform 2012: Parallels in March 2012, a series dedicated to exploring the limits of what constitutes black dance. In the program notes for the piece, you include a list of influences for the piece that ends with the phrase, "and as always the Venus Hottentot, Sara Baartman." Perhaps we can take up the question of the solo performer on stage, and the politics of solo performance, especially for a black woman. I actually didn't read the program notes until after I had seen the piece…

N: Perfect!

E: …ha, yes, I try…but when I read them and thought back to the performance, I thought, yes, okay, your use of the platform—this wooden, raised platform—and the atmosphere of the piece, clearly evoked the history and politics of display and being displayed, especially when it comes to black femininity and traumatic legacies of coerced display. But I think the piece is also about rewriting those politics and ripping them apart. How do you engage with that performance history and how are you working with and against it?

N: Well you know, it's like, how do I get away from an expectation? But the expectation, assumption, or stereotype is sometimes really powerful too. You know, yeah, playing the victim can be a way to lure people into a certain place and then you get them there and, WHACK, it's really not what you thought it was going to be. So I feel the same way about these influences and this idea about the solo. There is a vulnerability that I think is always, always the primary reason for doing solo performance. You're so vulnerable, you're so exposed. It's you and your many, many gods. There's just nothing else to look at, you know? The Hottentot was this woman, yes she had some handlers, she had some pretty crazy handlers, but it was just her and her body on display and there's been now a lot of interesting research about who she was and what she was doing. I suspect that Sara Baartman and Josephine Baker, these women had a good hand in knowing how to manipulate their bodies and the expectation of this savage. And I'm also always playing with this notion that I'm a black African woman and there are all sorts of assumptions about what that means…

E: Yeah, and how you're going to dance and how you're going to perform…

N: Exactly. So I take that as a given and it's a wonderful given, you know, it's like playing Bach. People have ideas about what that is, and then you walk in and you do something else. The world has an opinion about what an African woman looks like and how she's supposed to move, and I use those assumptions. Because those assumptions will probably never die out, they will just never die out. The Hottentot probably goes back to Adam and Eve—the woman being the seducer, the provocateur, she will take you to these dark places, and Africa is this "dark" place, and darkness, woman, darkness. It's like this black hole you keep getting sucked into. So I think those are such rich places for me to continue to investigate, because I guess we do need the boogeyman, we need to have some primitive other, and I know that people are looking at me as a

primitive other and so that's interesting— how can I take that assumption and turn it around. It's not really what you're looking at, there's something else going on, and if you're smart enough, you will see that you've been taken down a different path from what you expected. I don't know if I answered your question, but I think the Venus Hottentot has been done a great injustice because we want to make her simple, we want to make her the victim, but she was a grown ass woman when she left South Africa and she left on her own free will, and things did shift and fall apart once she got over seas, but she wasn't sold into slavery. She had some kind of agency which she was also negotiating, so I'm interested in that too. She was complicit in a lot of what was happening to her, as I am complicit in the work that I'm doing, you know, I can't say someone has made me do it…I'm doing it and you know, I don't need aid, I just need a fair space, I just need an equal space.

E: In your recent performance, you began the piece by slowly walking through the audience from behind, directing a hostile gaze down at the seated members of the audience. In terms of the expectations of the dancing African body as always virtuosic, vital, fun, fast, celebratory…

N: the life force!

E: …yes, the embodiment of a life force bubbling over with energy! Against these stereotypical expectations of the dancing African body, your piece felt like a fantastic exploration of intense slowness—an incredible distillation of movement, a slow repetition. Can you talk a bit about this slowness, what draws you to exploring slowness at this moment?

N: I'm interested more and more in the virtuosity of stillness. People take it for granted because it seems so simple, and yet it is really difficult. It's difficult to sustain that fragile state of not moving too much. It allows me to go inside and to see the interior space. Less about the exterior space, which I've already described as "I'm here for your consumption." But am I really? Because then I start to go inside. You know, so yes, my breasts are out in The Last Heifer, so there's sort of an exhibitionism—you can consume me in this way, but I'm not going to make it too easy, because I am not your co-conspirator in this consumption. Something else is going on—maybe there is some other space, the slowness, an attempt to become invisible. I think that's what I'm trying to go for—how to become invisible in public. My body is moving but I am sort of receding and going into this other interior space which I think has a lot of potential for exploration.

E: And I think there are political implications to this work, especially in terms of thinking about how there has historically been an expectation for certain bodies, especially bodies of color, to be hyper-visible…

N: Yes, I think the black body has this hyper-visibility. The black dancing body has all this history…you know, like, "Dance! Dance! Dance!"…then to stand there, in my piece, and not do that expectation…but I think there is a vitality or virtuosity in my piece that is easy to ignore, it's the reverse of the vigorous, jumping, dancing African with the drums, so it's easy to not see the virtuosity in the stillness. I've always been intrigued by the power of stillness, especially within Asian performance traditions, and that you start, in that stillness, to see so much detail.

E: For me, in that stillness with The Last Heifer, one of the details that started taking on a life of its own was your sweat. As you repeated that intensely slow phrase, pausing in deep stillness, your sweat started to collect and drip off your face. It became a dancer in its own right. So perhaps we can take sweat as a jumping off point. Sweat as a by-product of bodily effort, of labor, of challenge, of work. How do you approach sweat?

N: Yeah, I think about sweat as a taboo bodily fluid. You're not supposed to show effort. I like the "Western" concert stage because it's about privilege and power. It's the elite—only the aristocrats can be in this space. These people are not supposed to show effort, they're supposed to always show grandeur and elegance, and only the peasants sweat and huff and puff. Which in a way is exactly what the beginning modern dancers in American and Germany were working against—

dance as an aristocratic sort of space. Graham and Duncan—showing effort. The dancer's work became effort-full. I'm interested in this—putting so much stress on the body. But then you also make it pretty, and that's where it starts to disintegrate. In my piece—here I am in this nice looking light, in this nice looking costume, on this nice looking platter—it's supposed to be pretty, but then it starts to not get pretty, and you start to notice that it's work, "should I be enjoying this? Is she killing herself? Is she gonna die?" So in a way I'm interested in that—showing the bodily fluids, showing the work. The endurance—the human potential for endurance. I think we can endure so much. So in a way it also comes back to me because for the black woman, she is supposed to endure so much. That's another trope, "Oh the African woman, she endures. Oh God, she endures." So there's a little bit of that too.

E: I want to ask about the law, because I know that you went through law school in Zimbabwe. I think there's an initial reaction to this trajectory that goes something like, "Whoa, law school, that's so different than being a dancer and choreographer," but I think that I'm more interested in thinking about how the law and choreography are perhaps more similar. What happens if we think of them as perhaps similar (and yet extremely different) ways of moving bodies, controlling bodies, affecting bodies, and being moved? How do the law and choreography resonate for you?

N: Yeah, I think it's clearer and clearer to me that they're really the same thing. One uses words and reason, with the law you're trying to appeal to reason—"you have to be reasonable, what is the reasonable standard." With dance, I want to appeal to the opposite of reason—to the gasp—instead of having to ponder through the good, the bad, and the in-between, I'm interested in the thing that makes you want to jump up and respond. Both are legitimate ways to get at people. I have to strategize when I choreograph. It's the politics of art, there is some deep thinking about what this means. How will this be read? The thing that gets at the heart, which I love about dance, is the honesty and the vulnerability. A warm human body, a live body, there, doing all this stuff, sweating…it gets at the heart. There's just something about having a body present, looking at it going through these different shifts in time. I think that without fail, ultimately the physical presence will get at the heart. It's very different than talking on the phone or writing an article. I think that's what Kofi Annan is trying to do with his Syrian mission, but maybe he should send some dancers, because people respond to vulnerability. The law, when it's good, is about agitating for people, for the better of humanity, which I think all art forms are also doing. So in the end, they're both advocating for something, for the greater good.

Chipaumire will be performing her newest piece, Miriam, as part of BAM's Next Wave Festival in September: http://www.bam.org/miriam

A trailer for Miriam: http://vimeo.com/45702470#at=0

http://www.annadeaveresmithworks.org/news/60-nora-chipaumire-8-1-12

Dance Review:

Africa's Daughters, With Stories To Share
Nora Chipaumire and Okwui Okpokwasili at Danspace Project

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO
Published: March 20, 2012

George Balanchine once dismissed the notion of abstraction in dance, arguing that as soon as you place a man and a woman onstage, you have a story.

But what about when there is just one body onstage, and it belongs to a black woman? What, then, does the audience imagine? The Zimbabwean choreographer Nora Chipaumire tackled this question head-on last weekend at Danspace Project, where she shared a bill with the American performer Okwui Okpokwasili, who offered another kind of story.

Their program was the latest installment of Platform 2012: Parallels. Organized by the choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones, this excellent series has explored questions about black dance, 30 years after Mr. Houston-Jones arranged the original Parallels around similar themes.

"In 1982 my concept of black contemporary dance did not include anyone from Africa," he said, introducing Friday night's show and describing the artists as "daughters from Africa." (Ms. Okpokwasili is from the Bronx, but her parents are Nigerian; Ms. Chipaumire is now based in New York.)

In "The Last Heifer," Ms. Chipaumire (pronounced Chip-aw-MEE-ray) occupied a small platform in the center of St. Mark's Church, stalking around its perimeters as panels of light (designed by Carol Mullins) shifted around her. The choreography was simple and repetitive, like the spare, rhythmic loop of the traditional percussion instruments accompanying it.

She moved hinged at the waist, leaning forward, her knees bent and her hands curled almost into fists. Her eyes bored downward, only a few times rising to challenge her watchers' gaze. Sweat gathered on her head (shaved save for a topknot), eventually streaming down her face.

Ms. Chipaumire is an artist of ferocious intensity, and here it was coiled tightly, largely internally focused. Yet she was entirely on display. Naoko Nagata's costume was black except for a red tassel snaking down Ms. Chipaumire's back, underneath what remained of a militaristic coat (only the shoulders and sleeves were intact). When she arched her back and outstretched her arms in lush curves, her breasts slid in and out of view above a corset top.

Cows are bought and sold, owned. Here it was difficult not to associate Ms. Chipaumire's platform with an auction block and, also troublingly, to think of the ways in which we judge and consume performers.

Ms. Chipaumire has associated her solo with the work of Kara Walker. But I thought of this most strongly in the opening moments of "Bronx Gothic," by Ms. Okpokwasili (pronounced Oak-POKE-wah-silly) when she stood silhouetted in low light against a large, puckered canvas of white fabric. (It was designed by Peter Born, who also directed and did the evocative lighting with Ms. Mullins. Ms. Okpokwasili wrote the solo's text and songs.)

When she moved, it was to shake, violently, her long limbs, tracing spidery paths. Ms. Okpokwasili's stage presence is powerful too, but jittery. Here that energy flowed into a depiction of two adolescent girls, sharing accounts of their sexual activities (one is disturbingly advanced) and mostly harrowing dreams.

Their voices, convincingly rendered, come through a written exchange: Ms. Okpokwasili reading dog-eared, folded pages and letting them fall to the floor. It's a familiar narrative (one girl ends up pregnant), made strange and somewhat sinister by the throttled energy in its teller's body. Explicit or not, story tends to be inescapable, often maniacally so.

the village VOICE

Nora Chipaumire Storms the Barricades

Revisiting a war-torn youth

By Deborah Jowitt Tuesday, May 13 2008

Yi-Chun Wu
Nora Chipaumire in her *Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution)*.

Nora Chipaumire
Dance Theater Workshop
April 30 through May 3

If you didn't know that Nora Chipaumire is a powerful woman with a strong message to deliver, you'd sense it several seconds before her solo Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution) begins. She doesn't slip onto the stage during a blackout; you can hear her bare feet strike the floor as she strides into place. When a parallelogram of light appears around her, she's got those feet planted, and she's already breathing hard. Her shaven head and angular face are shining with sweat. She rolls up the sleeves of her white outfit and stares toward the mob (us) confronting her. Watch out! It's lucky that she doesn't take a real rock or two from one of the small piles on the floor; the imaginary ones she hurls could break your head. We are in Chipaumire's native Zimbabwe at the time of the Second Revolution, and this is a woman at the barricades—throwing stones, falling back, thrusting one aggressive hip at us as if it had a cutting edge. A film (by Chantal Buard and Kristin Tieche) of Chipaumire running through a ruined, desolate cityscape is projected on the back wall. She looks as if she could keep running forever.

Chimurenga is an expansion of Chipaumire's 2004 Convoys, Curfews and Roadblocks, and she has added film, décor, a new sound score, and three costume changes. I get that feeling that she has stretched her explosive material a little too thin. There are dead spots amid the many gripping passages. For instance, we wait in near darkness while she changes from one rough-edged yet shapely outfit by Naoko Nagata to another; we can't quite see her, but we can't not see her either. Her use of assemblage as a structure often makes it hard to understand how the vivid moments connect or add up.

The piece is dedicated to her brother, who died in 1994 at 33 (at present, life expectancy for males in Zimbabwe is reported to be 37 years). Perhaps it's his face that we see in close-up shots, along with photos of destroyed neighborhoods. She recites all the demeaning names for Africans used by the controlling white minority when Zimbabwe was Rhodesia. Huddling over a tiny pile of spot-lit rocks, she feverishly, uselessly rearranges them. At one point, we hear the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's 9th, played on what might be a music box or a distant, ruined piano.

As Chipaumire moves from one territory to another—each one delineated by a window or corridor of light on the floor—she relives tribal customs, happy memories of school days, and flight. Alex Potts's sound installation of hanging gourds, beautifully lit by David Robertson, conceals small speakers issuing intermittent murmur, but Chipaumire also balances one gourd on her head like a village woman coming from the well, flicking water with her fingers. She remembers cream pies and licks her lips over a special kind of orange juice and "the boys at Morgan High." Once she runs in place and the lighting casts dual shadows.

She's a wonderful dancer—settling into deeply bent knees, swaying her hips, wheeling her arms. In one arresting journey, her mouth opening in a silent howl, she ventures along a downstage path of light (this may be the part with music by Thomas Mapfumo & the Blacks Unlimited), pausing to lift one leg and look at her foot, as if placing it down required thought in addition to care. Tread softly on this troubled earth. Thoughtfulness is a crucial element in her performing. No matter what bitter, angry, wild explosion of movement she lashes herself into, you can see it begin to well up like the stirrings of a volcano.

http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-05-13/dance/nora-chipaumire-storms-the-barricades/

The New York Times

Dance Review

The Anguish of War, Expressed in Movement

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO
Published: May 3, 2008

Nora Chipaumire's "Chimurenga (struggle, cry, revolution)" demands close attention, even though she doesn't always make it easy. But it's no easy thing Ms. Chipaumire is trying to do in translating her youth during Zimbabwe's second war of liberation into a 60-minute dance-theater work.

Briana Blasko for The New York Times
Nora Chipaumire at Dance Theater Workshop.

She doesn't offer the neat Hollywood arc from suffering to redemption, but a fragmentary, raw bundle of deeply personal associations. You feel you are watching someone wrestling with a knot that won't come undone. "Chimurenga" is not, I imagine, the last piece on the subject that she will create. Not nearly.

Tall and muscular, with her head shaved bald save for a tiny patch toward the front, Ms. Chipaumire is capable of devouring a stage. But here she is confined, whether by slanting rectangles of light; a heap of red, earthlike material; or the chokehold of overwhelming emotion. Often she is doubled over, her feet stamping out a rhythm, her rigid arms flung out or pumping, as if she were doggedly running. Her hands, frequently raised, are sometimes spread in supplication, sometimes defiantly clenched. In one repeated motif she mimes throwing a stone, only to arc her body backward and around violently, as if the forces she is battling have swatted her away like a nettlesome fly.

Passages of strangled rage are interwoven with quieter moments suggesting lost days of domestic tranquillity: Ms. Chipaumire gently crouched and balancing a large gourd on her head, or softly reciting a list of remembered pleasures. An evocative film by Chantal Buard and Kristin Tieche splices footage of her running through an urban ghost town with contemplative close-ups; Alex Potts's sound installation (much of it emanating from a gorgeous medley of hanging gourds) likewise mixes hip-hop, jagged piano compositions and tinny lullabies of the music box variety. And then there is the joyous music of Thomas Mapfumo, the great, politically conscious Zimbabwean singer-songwriter. In one striking section Ms. Chipaumire stands at the front corner of the stage, staring down a white spotlight. "I am a child of revolution," she says, before lunging into a fierce, pelvis-rolling attack to "Shumba," by Mr. Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited. It is a moment of glorious release — one she doesn't allow herself (or the audience) to savor for very long.

Nora Chipaumire performs on Saturday at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077, dtw.org.