

Artful Exploration By Vuyani Dance

Choreographer/dancer Gregory Maqoma presents cross-cultural themes with a political edge.

CHRISTOPHER HYDE / DANCE REVIEW

October 18, 2009

Bates College has a tradition of bringing fine dance groups to Maine. Friday night's performance of "Beautiful Me," by the Vuyani Dance Theater, before a packed house at Schaeffer Theater, was exceptional, both in its exploration of African-European cross-cultural themes, and in the quality of its principal dancer and choreographer, Gregory Maqoma.

Maqoma's continuous marathon solo, "Beautiful Me," to music that represents a fusion of African, Indian and classical themes, includes a variety of African-inspired dances, solo music for cello, violin, percussion and sitar, the spoken word, bird whistles, and four-part harmony in the clicks that form an important part of many African languages.

The latter performance has to be heard to be believed.

But Maqoma later had the entire audience producing Italian-styled rolled "Rs," which in concert sound like a lion's roar. He ended the entire dance sequence with the thought that in spite of hundreds of hours of practicing "R," he was not able to pronounce his own name: Gregory.

Maqoma the dancer has transformed his body into a musical instrument, capable of expressing the gamut of human emotions -- love, rage, sarcasm, humor, fascination, despair, curiosity, resignation and reverence, to name a few portrayed on Friday.

Some of the techniques and poses are from classical ballet, some from the deep well of African dance, some from modern dance, and some original by Maqoma.

He also names three influential choreographers who contributed "minutes" to the new work.

Like a shaman, Maqoma can also transform himself into an animal. His bird dances are not mere imitations of avian gestures and peculiarities, but capture the essence of the creature.

"Beautiful Me" begins with a dialogue with a father, and its opening line is "Baba, I am a peacock."

Maqoma's hand and arm work are the most impressive parts of his repertoire. His fingers flutter like a hummingbird's wings while he is speaking, and sometimes his arms move so fast that they also blur into wings.

The gestures of his hand and fingers can be as expressive as an entire body pose.

A portion of "Beautiful Me," is political, burying the dead revolutionaries of Africa, asking George Bush why he didn't pull the trigger himself, or the pope if he has seen God, but the vignettes become an essential part of the dancer's search for self.

Maqoma is the perfect example of the old saw – "The personal is the political."

The Vuyani Dance Theater is touring the United States under the auspices of MAPP International Productions (www.mappinternational.org) and dance lovers should take any opportunity to see "Beautiful Me."

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram. He can be reached at classbeat@netscape.net.

Copyright 2009 by The Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. All rights reserved.