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It's complicated: Spectrum Dance Theater explores Africa in Donald Byrd's 'The Mother of Us All'

In "The Mother of Us All," Spectrum Dance Theater's Donald Byrd delivers what he calls "a cheeky pratfall down the rabbit hole of contemporary Africa."

By Michael Upchurch

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Outside Madrona Dance Studio on the shores of Lake Washington, it's a chilly, blustery day of rain squalls and sun breaks. But inside, where Spectrum Dance Theater is rehearsing its latest project, the heat is definitely on as rival trrios of dancers fiercely clap and stomp at one another, trying to impress, trying to intimidate, radiating rhythmic aggression — and sweat.

This dance-off is just one passage from Spectrum artistic director Donald Byrd's new work, "The Mother of Us All," the third and final installment in his series, "Beyond Dance: Promoting Awareness and Mutual Understanding."

Byrd's "PAMU projects," as he calls them, all have focused on highly charged sociopolitical subject matter, starting with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in "A Chekhovian Resolution" (2008) and continuing with America's relations with China in "Farewell" (2010).

In "The Mother of Us All," he'll deliver what he calls "a cheeky pratfall down the rabbit hole of contemporary Africa."

Like "Farewell," "Mother" will combine dance with spoken text, visuals, live music and prerecorded sound collage. But unlike "Farewell," which drew many of its motifs from a particular novel (Ma Jian's "Beijing Coma"), "Mother" takes much of its inspiration from Byrd's repeated visits to the continent as an artist, teacher and vacationer.

There are so many contradictions in modern Africa, he says during a rehearsal break, that you can feel like Alice adrift in Wonderland when you're there. Going from country to country, he adds, the incongruities between modern cities, with all their urban advantages and problems, and rural tribal areas, where people are "still living almost in a pre-colonial kind of way," jump out at you.

While "Mother" addresses the troubles and complexities of contemporary Africa head-on, the "rabbit-hole" metaphor was Byrd's way of granting himself permission to include the odd surreal touch: "If I did want it to be funny, it could be."

The antic poster for the show makes obvious reference to the Mad Hatter's tea party in Lewis Carroll's children's classic. But don't mistake the guests for Africans.

"The people at the party," he says, "are all the crazy Western people analyzing what Africa is — but we don't listen to what Africans have to say."

Byrd, in his PAMU projects, has been careful to avoid having his dancers pretend to be Chinese,

Palestinian or African. The dance steps may have their roots in the cultures of the societies under consideration, and the costumes and set design may suggest "a certain flavor." But the dancers, Byrd says, are "always just dancers."

The one directly African voice in the show will come from Zimbabwean performer Marsha Nyembesi Mutisi. And much of the text is by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathi, whom Byrd has come to see as the "mother" of the show's title.

Both the live score and prerecorded sound collage are by Seattle composer Byron Au Yong. Byrd wanted to sidestep the heavy percussion that most people associate with African music, so Young's live-score emphasis is on the kora, a 21-string West African harp to be played by local virtuoso Kane Mathis. The prerecorded score blends news reports with a miscellany of other sounds.

If that sounds like a lot of information coming at you, it is.

The multilayered action in "Mother" (as in "Farewell") is a direct outcome of its complicated subject matter, Byrd explains. He's even coined a term, "authentic structure," to describe what happens as pieces take on a form that mimics the complexity of the issues they're addressing, to the point of appearing chaotic.

To viewers who protest that they don't know where to focus their attention, Byrd asks, "Well, do you know where to look in life?"

Byrd admits that theater audiences are used to being told where to look and how to feel. But for this particular subject matter, he believes, streamlining or simplifying the stage action would be the wrong choice.

"I want people to gather the information however they can and make whatever sense out of it they can." Their role, as he views it, is to "curate" what they're seeing.

"I can maybe direct them or guide them in a certain direction," he says. "But I don't want to come to a conclusion for them."

It's not just an aesthetic but an ethical stance on Byrd's part.

"It minimizes the complexity of the subject to simplify it so much that it's easy to follow," he says. "It would be presumptuous on my part to reduce it to something that's easily digested."

His feelings about this began to emerge strongly, he says, in his 2007 piece, "Interrupted Narratives/WAR," which addressed the Iraq War.

"That whole thing happened," he argues, "because we had been presented with a kind of simplistic thinking about it." More reflection, he suggests, might have led to "better choices."

His hope is that, after leaving the theater, people will continue their own personal investigations into the subject matter and ideas raised on stage.

"Because I'm not an expert," he says. "I just have an opinion."

Slight pause.

"And my opinion," he says with a wry smile, "is that it's complicated."

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