

Black Dance in Toronto

A New Voice in the Global Village

BY PAULA CITRON

In 1960, Toronto was a sleepy outpost of the British Empire. Four decades later, the city has become a vibrant global village that boasts a hundred languages and dialects as mother tongues. Today Afro-Canadians make up one-fifth of Toronto's population, and black choreographers are beginning to express a unique voice that speaks from their own ethnic and racial experiences.

The overwhelming majority of Toronto's Afro-Canadians come from the former British islands of the Caribbean. Curiously, although Jamaicans are the largest group, professional dance is dominated by Trinidadians. As one "Trini" quipped to this writer: "Bob Marley put Jamaica on the map and they've been stuck in reggae ever since." Perhaps the pervasive Trini influence is due to Dr. Eric Williams, the former prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago. Williams founded the islands' annual Best Village Festival, which features towns competing against each other in traditional performing arts. Thus children in Trinidad grow up with Afro-Caribbean culture as an integral part of their lives.

Because Toronto's black dance has been influenced by West Indian rhythms and dance forms, this Afro-Caribbean sensibility sets it apart from modern dance expressed by African American choreographers. Toronto dancesmiths become quite testy when their American colleagues assume that Caribbean history is identical to their own. In fact, when the American civil rights movement was in its darkest hours, the former British colonies were becoming independent nations. Says choreographer Eddison B. Lindsay: "American blacks fought to become Americans; Caribbean blacks struggled to keep what was African."

The epicenter of black dance in Toronto is Vivine Scarlett. Born in England of Jamaican parents, Scarlett grew up in the virtually all-white town of Brockville, Ontario. Although she studied ballet and jazz, it was a 1993 dance class given by Usafiri, a West African-influenced drum and dance ensemble, that became her epiphany. "I discovered I had a history," she says, "and that Africa was the motherland." In 1995, Scarlett founded dance *Immersion*, a showcase of pan-

Canadian black choreographers held every February in conjunction with Black History Month. "I realized that if black dance was to have a profile, it had to be presented," she states.

There is an irony here, however: The lion's share of the audience for professional black dance in Toronto is white. Says Scarlett:

"Canadian blacks come from all over the map, and since Canada places cultural differences in a salad bowl rather than a melting pot," the resulting variety causes fragmentation. Thus, while amateur folkloric dance concerts are very popular, professional black dance companies are virtually ignored. In fact, Henry James, who ran a successful dance company in Tobago and choreographs for local groups, would like to see the various West Indian community dance ensembles

become one large professional Caribbean Dance Theatre, which would preserve traditions from all the islands. "North American contemporary dance styles are changing the dynamic of Caribbean dance," he says. "We need a company that performs the traditions in an undiluted form." Scarlett, on the other hand, believes that the next logical step for black dance is the founding of a national dance school that would become a focal point for drawing the reluctant black community into the embrace of professional dance. Scarlett's ultimate goal is an Alvin Ailey-size dance company that reflects the Canadian black

experience. Says Scarlett: "We must get Afro-Canadians to emulate other communities by giving the same respect to the serious arts as they do their popular culture."

Toronto has three professional black dance companies. The multi-cultural Ballet Creole was founded by Patrick Parson in 1990. His high-energy works range from African ritualism to abstract modern, but his repertoire is driven by the rhythm of the drums. "My pieces are 'rootical,' which means that they never really stray from my Afro-Caribbean sensibility," he says. Eddison Lindsay and Charmaine Headley co-founded COBA (Collective of Black Artists) in 1993 to present West African and Caribbean traditional dance as two separate

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Debbie Grossman, Tanya Jeffers and Kathleen Pyper, from left, of Ballet Creole in Patrick Parson's *Fete*.

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disciplines. "Our repertoire is a variety show of dance," explains Headley. "Each piece falls into a purity of form." Ronald Taylor began Canboulay Dance Theatre in 1993. His contemporary dance style has a ballet aesthetic, but the Caribbean influence can be seen in the bent knees and undulations that permeate his choreography. "I love strong torsos; I want to kill with presence," he says. Parson, Headley, Lindsay and Taylor all were born in Trinidad, although Headley was raised in Barbados. The signature piece of each company clearly reflects choreographic roots in the Caribbean. Parson's moving yet joyous *Forbidden Freedom* (1993) follows the struggle from enslavement to emancipation. Lindsay Headley's fascinating and colorful *Danse Belé* (1995) weaves a tapestry of traditional Caribbean dances and African religious rites together to educate audiences about the rich cultural past of the West Indies. Taylor's *Mass* (1998) uses an original score by South African classical composer Bongani Ndodana. The beautiful work traces Taylor's own spiritual journey and is built on imagery from African rituals, Afro-Caribbean Christianity and the Eastern religions.

According to Parson, no matter how bleak the theme, Afro-Caribbean dance is celebratory. This inherent vitality is generated by a collision of cultures and the inseparable union of music and dance. Not only did the islanders retain many of their African tribal and religious traditions, they also embraced influences from their colonial masters—the reel and jig from the British, the minuet, waltz and quadrille from the French, all seasoned with Spanish and Dutch spice. Calypso, the heart of Afro-Caribbean music, was an outgrowth of "extempo," the chanted, improvised dialogue rooted in the activities of daily life. Thus, the music and dance that developed in the West Indies are a true Creole fusion, a pot-pourri of rhythm and movement vocabulary that is unique to the Caribbean, and in fact, unique to each island.

Black choreography in Toronto has developed into its own hybrid by filtering this Afro-Caribbean experience through the city's cultural mosaic. The four founders first came to North America for advanced training, having acquired a background in folk, ballet, jazz and modern dance in the islands. Parson, Lindsay and Headley studied at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre, while Taylor trained at Juilliard in New York. This North American emphasis on technique refined their island rawness by producing a clarity and purity of line. Both Taylor and Parson use non-black dancers in their companies, which further affects the Afro-Caribbean dynamic by layering in diverse training and ethnic backgrounds.

Not every Toronto black choreographer is part of this Afro-

Caribbean loop. For example, Canadian-born Anne-Marie Hood's parents are from Grenada, but her modern-trained body never felt right performing Afro-Caribbean vocabulary, nor did she easily accept the coquetry implicit in the dances. Hood's current interest is performance art addressing women's issues. "For those of us in the first generation, it's a struggle to hold onto the Afro-Caribbean collective ideal," she says. "For me, dance exists as an individual expression." Venezuelan-born Livia Daza-Paris feels distanced from her West Indian colleagues because English is not her first language, yet, because she sees her

roots as being as much Afro-Caribbean as Latino, she also feels out of step with Toronto's Latin American community. "I'm lonely in what I'm doing," she says. "When Vivine put me in a 'danceImmersion', she validated my own eccentric voice." Her satiric *Once Upon a Time Salsa* (1995) explores the frustration of being from a minority group whose music is in vogue. "Even though my culture is 'hot,' I'm not. It's a form of exploitation. Racism has driven me to do the work I do."

In fact, Canadian racism, more subtle than the American variety, has played a part in holding back the growth of professional black dance. For decades, the various government arts councils denied grants to black dance companies on the grounds that their work was ethnic rather than professional. When that policy was changed in the last decade, pressure was put on the founders to band together to form one strong company, ignoring the fact that their individual choreographic aesthetics are completely different. Also, black choreographers who have an Afro-Caribbean bias are relegated to second stages at dance festivals, while their "ethnic-less" modern/contemporary black colleagues are given the limelight.

Dance presenters are also reluctant to bring black companies to the mostly white Canada that exists outside the largest urban centers. Support within the black community itself has not been strong. Some black immigrants, who originally came to Canada to better themselves and have now achieved middle-class status, prefer assimilation over heritage. As well, professional dance lacks corporate sponsors among the black business class because arts patronage is simply not a tradition in the West Indies.

The emerging black dance voice, however, will not be silenced. "My movement includes all the influences I've picked up in my journey from Trinidad to Canada," says Parson, "and it's bursting to speak out." And Daza-Paris adds: "Living in Canada is the edge that is forcing us to create our work." ■

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Monica del Rio and Patrick Parson dance to the drumming of Allan Ramsarran, foreground, in Parson's *Ritual*.

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