

Guest Columnist

Exploring Mixed Race Through Mixed Messages

Through dance and video, Raissa Simpson explores the experiences of being multi-race in her show, playing May 2 and 3 in San Francisco.

By Crystal Carter

When Raissa Simpson began her dance career, she found herself cast in performance roles as a Black female dancer. The mixed-race Simpson (she's Black and Filipina) took this as inspiration for her newest performance piece, *Mixed Messages*, featured this weekend at ODC Theater in San Francisco. Simpson wants to convey through the dance the emotional tug-of-war that mixed-race people often experience.

"Too often I find myself thinking that I am so unique that I do not belong to either community," she says. "It is important to not divorce your background but to embrace your mixed heritage."

In *Mixed Messages*, dancers will investigate ideas, time and space through the body movements of mythical creatures in an urban environment. JooWan Kim will provide a live piano performance while Kyle Canfield (who has opened for the likes of Zap Mama) will provide the atmospheric soundscape. Simpson, who's known for incorporating live video in her performances, will have a projection screen showing the creation of a mural by young adults from the Third Street Youth Center & Clinic in San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood.

"I would like the audience to be in a state of awe," says Simpson. "Amazed at both the dancing feats and the profound connection of imagery."

The issues of identity, collective thought and "the electronic divide" fascinate and inspire Simpson. Her dances, she says, are practical experiments in movement with a deeper consciousness on how technology affects daily routine.

Simpson studied under Robert Moses, artistic director of Robert Moses' Kin dance company, and Joanna Haigood, cofounder of Zaccho Dance Theatre, both known for innovating the dance scene by promoting social awareness. Since 2005, Simpson has been the artistic director of Push Dance Company, where she has pursued her work in dance, storytelling and film. Studying the Harlem Renaissance in relation to the film industry led her to create a work called, *Inner Cinema*. She filmed street signs named after influential Black people and then incorporated those visual images into her dance performances.

Later, she created *Judgments in Milliseconds*, allowing her audiences to see what she, as a woman of color with what she calls "kinky" hair, has to go through to be accepted in an Americanized society. The viewer sees Simpson's frantic footwork explaining the frustration she feels toward her chemically-processed, straightened hair but also her comedic side as she elegantly frolics around embracing her natural 'fro, accompanied by a backdrop of psychedelic digital images.

The plot for *Mixed Messages* began around the time that Simpson was awarded a grant from the San Francisco Art Commission. She started working with designer, artist and educator, Marlon Sagana Ingram, who has worked at the Third Street Youth Center and Clinic as an instructor. His work relates specifically to design and mural art instruction as well as to youth leadership. Two of his students, Antoine Sawyer and Paris, who have their own dance company, will be featured in *Mixed Messages*, a contemporary dance piece.

“The youth are important to any kind of creative movement,” says Ingram. “Especially the arts.”

The center works to connect young people to creative outlets. “People are a key component of my work,” Simpson says. “This mix of young dancers and visual artists brings a rawness to the project.” Together, Simpson and the young people will work on presenting performances, round table discussions and community events. Some will be free to the public.

Simpson recently took her show to Seattle, where she visited the MAVIN Foundation, which is dedicated to celebrating mixed-race people and their families. She ends her tour in San Francisco where it will be featured during Bay Area National Dance week and premiered at ODC Commons dance studio.

“As a choreographer this is a very exciting and very liberating collaboration,” Simpson says. “My audience will have a deeper understanding of each other as the show evolves.”

Mixed Messages shows on Saturday, May 2 and Sunday May 3, 2009 at 8:00pm. Location: ODC Commons Studio B Theater, 351 Shotwell Street, San Francisco. Pushdance.org for ticket information.

Crystal Carter is a member of the Bay Area Black Journalist Association. She blogs at popscampaign.blogspot.com.