

# BWW Review: LULA WASHINGTON DANCE THEATRE is an Entity All its Own at The Ford Theatre

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by Valerie-Jean Miller Jun. 14, 2018

Lula Washington, an L. A. native from Watts, along with her husband Erwin Washington and daughter Tamica Washington Miller, have been the incumbent founders, creators, directors and choreographers of the Lula Washington DANCE THEATRE since 1980. They began with the goal to motivate, educate, inspire, challenge and enrich the lives of young people so they could become



successful, productive and competitive citizens. Thirty years later, and now a major dance company all over the world, their appearance here in Los Angeles at The Ford Theatre was an incredible ensemble of dance works choreographed by a variety of talented artists, including Lula and Tamica, and performed by one of the most powerful, strong and exciting company of dancers on the planet.

"There Is Always Tomorrow," their opening piece, choreographed by Tamica Washington Miller, takes us through reality versus "wearing rose-colored glasses," so to speak, in an explosive and entertaining piece featuring Joshua Alexander, Bernard Brown, Tehran Dixon, Jasmine Francisco, Christopher Frazier, Krystal Hicks, Saidiya Imari and Michael Tomlin III. There is a square box covered with a long draped cloth center stage, with a pair of very cool shades on top of it. The dancers enter individually, examining, looking through the glasses, inquisitive about them, and as four dancers put them on, it suddenly becomes a party atmosphere, as they dance joyfully with smiles and exuberance, ecstatically playful, wrapping and rolling themselves in the tablecloth, each standing on top of the box, each doing extraordinary poses requiring control, balance, extension and limberness; giddy and with not a care in the world. One dancer's glasses come off and slide away, and she instantly becomes serious and concerned, until she finds them, puts them back on and the world is good again. The dancers' body language and movements, whenever the glasses are on, are celebratory, hopeful and happy. When they decide to remove the glasses, everything becomes somber, heavy and worrisome. All the while they are giving us beautiful line, spiral pirouettes down to the floor, split leaps, controlled developpe's, wicked penche's, solid double front



attitude turns, intricate floor work, acrobatic feats and technique galore.

It progresses from intense joy, almost as if they are in a dream state, to annoyance, disappointment and pain when the glasses aren't on. It culminates with a female dancer laughing wildly, with glasses on, the others concerned, and when one male dancer slowly, deliberately places the glasses back on, with a satisfied smile on his face, he lifts her overhead in a spectacular whirlwind of turns in that position, as the others lay on the floor... She abruptly jumps off the stage as they say "There's always Tomorrow" and runs off... from the back of the house she yells, "It's today!" ... pause... runs and jumps back on stage as they take their bows. A wonderful beginning for a dance concert!

Next, "Enough," choreographed by David Rousseve, was danced to a song by Aretha Franklin, and was originally commissioned and performed by the San Francisco-based duet company RAWdance for a concert of 12 five-minute works by 12 different California choreographers. At the beginning, there is a video showing the shooting of a black man portrayed against the natural backdrop of rocks and stones that are part of the environment and beautifully lit in the open air arena that is the Ford Amphitheater. A couple dances fluidly and with purpose, as some of the lyrics of the song are splashed on that same natural backdrop. As they emulate the feeling of frustration and empathy combined, they dance beyond the music, in total silence, trapped in a rapid reproduction of movements leading to exhaustion, panting and gasping from the effort. Very compelling.

"Reign," the genius of Rennie Harris, choreographer, is evident as you watch it unfold. It begins with one female dancer, moving to an African beat, in an eye-catching costume... the music begins to increase in intensity, becoming stronger and quicker... The other ladies enter in the same fabulous outfits, bright yellow halter dresses, black tights and sneaker-boots, with the men jumping crazily around them as they gyrate their hips, flinging their bodies, and in contrast, some pop-locking movements, very together and exact, as well as funky robot moves, done with wild abandon, yet tightly contained, as the music transforms into a full-on gospel rendition. Weaving through very modern-style dance and many other genres, they meld this piece together in a rapturous experience for the viewers. Finally, there is a



feeling that God's Love will, along with man's input, prevail. And to top that off, Lula, then Tamika, come out on stage and, to an already standing audience, encouraged everyone there to let loose and join in ~ which was duly accomplished and much appreciated. Nothing like a feel-good, soul-enhancing shot-in-the-arm experience at the Theatre!



Each dance piece ends with an exclamation point! There is a message to each presentation, and is always perfected, paced and polished, pre-performance. The mark of a complete and notable collaborative dance ensemble/company. Putting these pieces together, each member contributes their individual ideas, and things come to fruition through the combining of those original thoughts. It is a true artistic collaboration.



Following a slight pause (no formal intermission, which I prefer) "Hallowed," choreographed, then re-worked by Kyle Abraham and restaged by Tamisha Guy, (originally presented in 2014 as part of Kyle Abraham's Resident Commissioned Artist presentation at New York Live Arts) was performed next. With Gospel incantations, panels stage left and right with cloud formations on them, and three lone spotlights slowly lowered downstage, a dancer enters, another from upstage, down the stairs, and beautifully mirror each others movements. Their dance, in bare feet, is exquisite. Another woman enters, and they all dance together, balancing in difficult positions, extremely concentrated as they go beyond placement, reaching beyond, focusing as one. It is unifying and uplifting... It then becomes subdued and concentrated, as they move, facing backwards, upstage, holding the beat, feeling the choir's vocals, until... they break out, to the glorious organ music, with flowing and then very isolated positions in praise and glory. The feeling is very enriching and righteous.



The evening's topper was a glorious suite to a medley of Earth, Wind & Fire's Hits, entitled "Open Your Eyes," choreographed by Lula Washington, and I quote, "OPEN YOUR EYES is joyous, uplifting and thought-provoking. The message in Earth, Wind & Fire's music is very much needed in today's society." (I confer) "The choreography in this piece is very different from the other works tonight and it gives you the space to expand your mind to discover the message in the work."



Starting with the sound of a xylophone, as three dancers pose to the accents, an electric piano kicks in while the dancers do an intertwined pas de trois, adding in flugelhorn and trumpets, first loud, then muted, attired in the most movement-allowed, sexily worn minimal costumes, in the most brilliant colors of an electrified rainbow spectrum, ever seen, I'm sure, on The Ford's stage. The colors were enough to get



your motor going, and wow, did the dancers deliver on this one!

The women in halter tops and skirts, the men in sheer, sleeveless capes and dance shorts, colors ever swirling together to totally mesmerize the senses, danced the best of the moves from an era I can totally relate to, and which I will let you take a guess about. Not only did they re-create those moves, but they made them new, by adding a certain tweak, which made them more like expressions imbedded in movement, and it definitely affected the audience!



Between the all-out sounds of the instruments; electric bass, flute, guitar, conga and drums, with intricate brass that is the sound of this iconic group Earth, Wind & Fire, and the dancers moving across the floor with Afro-American deep-plies movement and a stellar adagio section, this section pleased the audience to no end.



The music stops, and three women, in the most beautiful iridescent angel wings, appear upstage center, and, sans music, began to quiver and dance, using the butterfly-like wings to create shimmering flight and flutter patterns, adding in a groovy song, with pas de chats, grand jete's, and innovative arm movements that made your heart soar along with them. It was a most spectacular display of all the arts at work, coming together at one time. So unique. Beautiful, memorable section.



Next came two men, attired in jeans and tees, singularly and then together, boogieing to "Devotion," acting out the words in the song through movement and attitude. A great example of how there are no words needed to convey a feeling, when dancers are the conveyors and are dancing to this caliber of music and vocals. They are in and out of partnering each other, doing some very acrobatic movements and lifts, all very genuine, masculine and exciting to watch.



Lastly, the party really got started, when the company raised the non-existent roof with their performance to, first, "Do You Remember," in more fabulous costumes and colors. It begins with three dancers, wearing catchy, splashy outfits; sitting in chairs on stage, dancing while sitting, very groovily, to the casual and relaxed tempo, accenting the vocal and musical punches, quickly changing and up on their feet to the up-tempo "Boogie-Woogie, Dance" section, where they are intricately hopping to the beat, even throwing in a section of the the Swan quartet from the "Swan Lake" ballet,



at a quickened and playful tempo. As "Keep Your Head To The Sky" began, an eruption of colorful costumes and soulful, spiritual dancing began, that lifted us all up and gave us such inspiration and joy in that



moment, that it carried us all out of the theatre as if we had been to a revival of sorts, not minding the un-parking ahead of us in the least.

I suddenly got on an "in-" kick ~ this Evening of Dance was inclusive, inviting, inspiring, igniting, indelible, infectious, incredible, invasive, inquisitive, innovative, and enticing, and recommended to anyone who loves being moved through Artistry.



Credit most of the perfect costuming to Lula and Tamika, as well as Reid Bartelme. Of great mention is the Lighting/Technical Director for the show, Micheal D. Ricks. His forethought with each piece is perfectly in tune with the feeling, music, location and choreography.



The Company has received numerous accolades and honors, and worked with some of the most distinguished choreographers, among them Donald McKayle, Katherine Dunham, and Louis Johnson.



This performance is part of the 2018 Department of Cultural Affairs' LA Dance Platform, a community-curated selection of programming that ran concurrently with the Dance USA Conference. Lula and Erwin Washington were recognized this summer for their impact on dance in Los Angeles and beyond. They received the Dance/USA Champion Award at this year's conference. The Champion Award is given to an organization, business, foundation, or individual in appreciation for their achievements, leadership, outstanding service, and dedicated efforts that have sustained and significantly advanced the dance field in the Annual Conference host city.



Lula has also choreographed some blockbuster movies, including "The Little Mermaid" and James Cameron's "Avatar," assisted by her daughter Tamika, who also played the motion picture body for the film's Queen Mother Mo'at.



The Lula Washington DANCE THEATRE has performed around the globe and in addition to their performances in schools everywhere each year, they operate a dance studio, located at 3773 Crenshaw Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90016, 323-292-5852 (Phone) | 323-292-5851 (Fax).



Photos courtesy of Timothy Norris



