

They Could Have Danced All Night

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This joint was jumping as The History of Black Dance in America strutted its stuff on stage at the historic, 100-year-old Santa Monica Bay Woman's Club located at 1210 4th Street. Brilliantly produced and directed by Ron Parker, the two-hour multimedia performance, in honor of Black History Month, was a "dance back" in time to the African roots of dance, and how it influenced dance in America, spanning the 1800s to today, beginning with a Zulu warrior ritual brought over from Africa by men destined to be sold into slavery.

Under Parker's most creative choreography, the highly spirited and incredibly talented Central Avenue Dance Ensemble, as well as guest dancers, danced their way through African and African-American inspired popular social dances. Vintage film clips of such icons as Lena Horne, Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers, and Vernon & Irene Castle, accompanied by a fascinating instructional narrative, augmented the live performances and covered the evolution of such dances as the "Cake Walk." That dance was started by slaves on plantations to mimic high society and the winning slaves would receive cake as their prize, which is how the name evolved.

This gifted, high energy ensemble, dressed in appropriate, gorgeous period cos-

tumes, danced their way through 28 dances including "Black Bottom," "Walking the Dog," "Jazz Dance," "Fox Trot," "Charleston," "Ragtime," "Mambo," "Samba," "Lindy Hop," "Swing," "Urban Cha Cha," "Bop," "Disco/Hustle," "Salsa," and the fad dances of the 80s and 90s, as well as a rousing tap dance sequence. Most of the dances were preceded with an explanation of their derivation. Perhaps the most surprising revelation was learning that the most beautiful and sensual "Argentine Tango" evolved out of dancing by Black slaves who wound up in South America, calling themselves African Argentines. The dance team began with the original version and beautifully transitioned the movements into what we now know as "Argentine Tango."

The evening, sponsored and hosted by Santa Monica Bay Woman's Club, who gave the production needed support, was a joyous, fun-filled homage to the African roots of dance. In the spirit of continuing the celebration, at the end of the program, dancing continued in the upstairs ballroom of the club where some audience members put on their dance shoes and whirled away the rest of the evening.

A word about the Santa Monica Bay Woman's Club: The club presents many cultural and civic events throughout the year, the next one being on March 30 at 7:30 p.m. called "For Freedom," Taking a Stand Against Human Trafficking. The evening will include food, live music, keynote speakers, and a silent auction. For more information, call 310.395.1308 or visit www.smbwc.org.

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The History of Black Dance in America

by Rachel Levin

February 25, 2012

The Santa Monica Bay Women's Club

1210 Fourth Street

Santa Monica, CA 90401

310-395-1308

Performed by the Central Avenue Dance Ensemble

Chester Whitmore, Founder and Choreographer

Ron Parker, Managing Director

www.historyofblackdance.org

Last weekend, for the second year in a row, the Central Avenue Dance Ensemble (CADE) performed its entertaining and educational show "The History of Black Dance in America" at the Santa Monica Bay Women's Club in honor of Black History Month. A combination of live dance and video with voiceover narration, the show aimed to trace a line between the spiritual and social dances of enslaved Africans and the development of vernacular dances in the Americas.

Throughout the ambitious program, which leapt from traditional Zulu dances in Africa to popular American dances from the 1800s to the 2000s, the resounding message was that American dance (and dance throughout the Americas) has been defined by the contributions of slavery's descendents. The movement styles brought from native African lands as well as the modes of physical expression that emerged as a response to slavery and segregation in the New World laid the foundation for what came to be quintessentially American dance forms, from the Cakewalk to the Charleston, swing to salsa, and disco to hip hop.

It may sound like fodder for a PhD dissertation, but lively performances by the unflappable ensemble members of CADE, along with the folksy video supplements, made the history lesson simple to digest and easy to get swept up in. The most well-known dances were, not surprisingly, the most crowd-pleasing. The spirited Black Bottom and Charleston from the 1920s, with their exuberant kicks and tongue-in-cheek pelvic thrusts, were an energetic highlight. The zoot suits and velvety slides of the Vernacular Jazz number dripped with style. A video of the ensemble performing fad dances of the 80s and 90s, from the electric slide to the Roger Rabbit, was a pure party.

But the lesser-known dances were opportunities to expose the crowd to an even richer history and explore the African contribution to dance in the Americas on a deeper level. Archival footage of spiritual dances like the Ring Shout from the mid-1800s demonstrated a close corporeal link with African tribal rituals. A performance of Candombe, originally danced by descendents of Bantu in Argentina and Uruguay, revealed a striking and surprising similarity to the Argentine tango; it is thought to be the root of the dance that germinated in the brothels of Buenos Aires.

The tango is a prime example of the theme of cooptation that ran throughout the show. Time and again, white dance makers took dances developed in black communities and popularized them to a white majority, who often had no awareness of their black origin. Whether it was Irene and Vernon Castle introducing the Foxtrot in the 1930s, Arthur Murray watering down the Cuban Mambo, or American Bandstand broadcasting white dancers doing the Bop, black contributions to American dance were often concealed.

This, in turn, is what made the CADE show so poignant and important, as it was a rare chance to shine a spotlight on a history that's been told primarily in academic circles by historians but rarely by dancers. The show's introductory voiceover suggested that dance is in fact the heart of the African American spirit. Stripped of their freedom and identity upon arrival in the New World, the Africans forced here by the slave trade could only carry memories, both cognitive and corporeal. Dance is the essence of what remained. It is a history literally written on the body.

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