

Celebrating a Poem and a Novel by James Baldwin, With Movement

‘Baldwin Through Dance’ Adapts a Poem and a Novel

By SIOBHAN BURKE APRIL 27, 2014

With its annual [Live Ideas](#) festival, New York Live Arts, an institution generally devoted to dance, opens its doors to a wider range of programming. The curatorial approach, so far, involves unpacking the work of a cultural figure who bridges many fields of inquiry, the body included. Last year’s theme was “The Worlds of Oliver Sacks.” This year, it’s “James Baldwin, This Time!” (with “This” underlined for emphasis). That Harlem-born writer and activist would have been 90 this August, and Live Arts is one of several New York organizations celebrating “The Year of James Baldwin,” an extended (and timely) reflection on his social and literary achievements.

While Baldwin’s legacy may be most firmly rooted in books we can hold on to, live performance is an appropriate medium through which to honor someone who urged that “the challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.” On Saturday, amid a week of readings, conversations and concerts, two choreographers — Charles O. Anderson, of Dance Theater X in Philadelphia, and the venerable Dianne McIntyre — brought us “Baldwin Through Dance,” responding to his meditations on race and national identity through tapestries of movement, song and spoken word.

Like flags of mysterious nations, 13 opulent quilts, suspended from the rafters, presided over Ms. McIntyre’s “Time Is Time” (a world premiere), which transformed Baldwin’s written poem “Song (for Skip)” into a danced one. The first person onstage was the composer Onaje Allan Gumbs, identified in the program as the Keys. Hunched over a piano in the glow of a single spotlight, he played something plaintive and plush. Into this contemplative space wandered the 10-year-old Kalimah Wouadjou (The Children), eyeing the woven patterns above her with apprehension and wonder. Rising on her toes, she touched one with her palm.

Ms. Wouadjou — soon joined in more forceful, full-bodied passages by Rachel McSween (the Witness), Yusef Miller (the Voice), William Roberson (the Brother) and the silver-haired Ms. McIntyre (the Time) — became the focal point of this fleeting piece. An orator as much as a mover, Mr. Miller delivered Mr. Baldwin’s lines with rapturous clarity and conviction. Through flashes of color (Shireen Dickson’s costumes) and restless, wrestling motion (Ms. McIntyre’s frisky feet and scribbling hands), his more sobering messages came across: about blackness becoming many colors; about “a small boy staring at the thunder” and “manhood calculating through this hell.”

“Our children are the morning star,” he said, a stirring final phrase, though the wide-eyed Ms. Wouadjou, unflappable in her sky-blue dress, had made that clear already.

At just 20 minutes, “Time Is Time” was merely a preamble to the New York premiere of Mr. Anderson’s “Restless Natives,” inspired by Baldwin’s 1962 novel, “Another Country.” Set in a nightclub called Home, where a provocative mistress of ceremonies (Ursula Rucker) asked tough, smart questions about race (and “postrace”), the work lost steam despite moments of infectious soulful dancing from the cast of nine. Its long-winded story, about a troubled young man named Rufus, had something to teach. But with ideas as sprawling and as prickly as Baldwin’s, there is more power in brevity.



Baldwin Through Dance From left, Rachel McSween, Yusef Miller and William Roberson (with Kalimah Wouadjou and Dianne McIntyre in the background) in “Time Is Time,” at New York Live Arts on Saturday. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times