

Voices of Strength

JOAN D. FROSCH



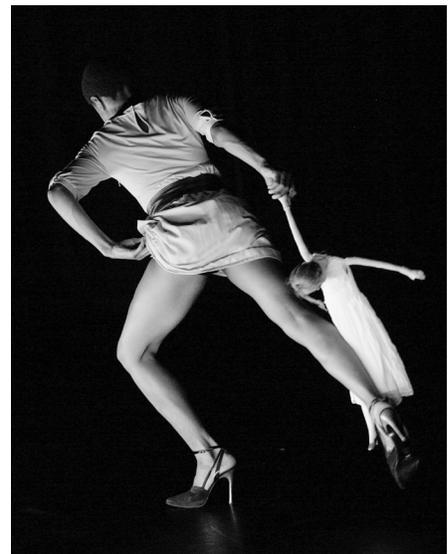
Contemporary visual and performing arts have surged alongside Africa's economic expansion in the last decade. Not unlike their contemporaries in commerce, African artists live and work in the possibilities and the paradoxes of the present. Notably, in the late 1990's, a number of African women artists—particularly those in dance and the visual arts—stepped forth to interrogate the disillusioning confines of women's post-independence/post-apartheid lives. Ivorian choreographer Béatrice Kombé (1973-2007) proved a harbinger of African women who would build art not only by women but also about women's lives. The intensity of the work inspired awe and blew open a choreographic space previously dominated by men.

In the fall of 2012, audiences across the United States had the opportunity to engage with five female contemporary theater makers/choreographers and cultural leaders—Nelisiwe Xaba (South Africa), Kettly Noël (Haiti/Mali), Gbahihonon Nadia Beugré (Côte d'Ivoire), Maria Helena Pinto (Mozambique), and Bouchra Ouizguen (Morocco). These artists unpacked the interrogations of their artistic journeys in a six-city American tour, curated and produced by MAPP International Productions in partnership with the Africa Contemporary Arts

Consortium (TACAC), founded by the Center for World Arts of the University of Florida in concert with celebrated national arts entities such as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Bates Dance Festival, among others.

Entitled "Voices of Strength: Contemporary Dance and Theater by Women from Africa," the U.S. tour of African women choreographers was prepared at the KVS Theatre in Brussels in June 2012. Supported by funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and KVS, I conducted a series of meetings and one-on-one interviews with the choreographers in residence at KVS. The artists generously shared insights into artistic creative processes, personal and professional stories, and concerns about the dynamic situations in Africa that often strike women first. Based on these discussions, I formed a set of *Voices of Strength* visual and written contextual materials to introduce American audiences, critics, and presenters to their work. The visual materials were further used to fuel a fundraising campaign to support the success of the tour. The materials now comprise part of a larger book/technology project entitled "*Movement (R)Evolution Africa*," after my documentary feature film (2009). The performances and community events of "*Voices of Strength*" engaged American

audiences in vivid, real-time, spaces of encounter with five extraordinary choreographers and eight exquisite performers. The artists broadly shared their art and ideas, and primarily with those who would rarely reciprocate the visit. Thus the artists not only sharpened audiences' ability to perceive, but to imagine Africa anew. Indeed, the decolonization of perceptions, practices, institutions, and histories is pedagogy far from finished. The works of Nelisiwe Xaba, Kettly Noël, Gbahihonon Nadia Beugré, Maria Helena Pinto, and Bouchra Ouizguen collectively shift victim to agent, two-dimensional perceptions to three, and stasis to transformation. Thanks to each of the artists of *Voices of Strength*, American audiences have experienced a profound conceptual shift—where African women's points of view dislodge themselves from "the back" of Americans' concerns to front and center on the stages of our imaginations.



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