Juneteenth: A celebration to remember

by Emmaly Wiedohlt

It was June 19, 1865, in Galveston, Texas. Union soldiers led by Major General Gordon Granger arrived with news that the Civil War had ended and that the enslaved were now free, a full two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The shock and jubilation that followed has come to be known as Juneteenth, a combination of "June" and "nineteenth". Almost one-hundred-fivey years later, Juneteenth has grown into a widely celebrated holiday of African American freedom and achievement, while also encouraging self-development and respect for all cultures.

Here in the Bay Area dance community, we have a Juneteenth celebration of our own through Grown Women Dance Collective. Grown Women Dance Collective is a group of former professional dancers who came together in 2009 to provide a safe space for women, female dancers to create beautiful work in that is accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. Founded by veteran dancer Tonya Maria Amos along with Michelle Ned a Maria Castilla, and Eurydice Rose, three of the women met at Alvin Ailey American Dance Center over twenty years ago and sought to eventually find a place that celebrated and supported African American culture through dance.

Says Amos: "Michelle and I spoke about creating art for years and noted about ten years ago how many 'greats' we were losing in the African American community. We decided to create a dance company to honor them and their contributions to African American culture. June was the perfect time to do this, so I saw a huge void in the community for Juneteenth celebrations."

Based in Contra Costa, Grown Women Dance Collective brings Juneteenth to an area of the Bay that has less in the way of cultural dance performances and celebrations. "We have been urged each year to come to San Francisco's Berkeley/Oakland where it would flourish easily, but we are hard-headed and believe that Contra Costa also deserves the arts and cross-cultural family events," says Amos.

This year's Juneteenth will be on Saturday, June 30 at 4pm at the Willows Theatre in Concord and seeks to honor notable African American music artists who have died since 2000. Amos describes the program as follows: "The program honors about 15 musical geniuses through multimedia (photos projected on a screen, quotes about their lives and accomplishments) and dance. There are about ten numbers that are honored through concert dance: live drumming by Miriam Makeba, a Lena Horne solo; a Ray Charles solo; Luther Vandross' 'Dance with my Father'-an amazing experience where I get to dance with my dad (a sixty-seven year old ex-basketball player), an en pointe pas de deux to Run DMNC (I'm Master Jay), a Michael Jackson solo, a Whitney Houston solo, 'Amazing Grace' sung by a talented singer, and a group piece to Nina Simone out with Timbaland. The program opens with an intro and history of Juneteenth and ends with a Black History photo montage from slavery to Barack Obama set to James Brown's "Living in America."

"What started as a labor of love has grown into a really fun, uplifting, family-friendly evening honoring amazing African American musical artists that have impacted the fabric of American culture. We fly in several dancers from New York (all in their twenties) who I've worked with in different companies. This year we have two dancers coming in from San Diego, one of the most respected ballerinas in Mexico, and the first African American to play with the Metropolitan Opera (she retired from the SF Symphony at seventy-two and is now eighty-four years old)"

Performers include Renee Monique Brown, Mindy Haywood, Aliyah Hassan, Dauniel Marshall, Jessica Russo, Audredea Seidell Dunns, and Elyane Jones. In addition to the evening performance of dance and music, GWDCC is also holding a silent auction to try to raise funds. Through increased funds and awareness, GWDCC hopes to eventually expand its one day festival into a partnership with local history, music and dance teachers and to present Black History Month lessons plans in the schools.

Despite its limited size and funding, in the past four years since its inception Juneteenth has managed to bring awareness and appreciation to African American cultures in Contra Costa County by bridging generations and cultures, particularly the older generation with the younger generation, and by introducing concert dance to usually non-dance attending audiences.

"We're hoping that the audience experiences the power and beauty of concert dance and the cross cultural bridges that it can form. It's amazing how people who may never have had a conversation with someone of a different race soon starts swaying to the music, talking and hugging their neighbors who were strangers just an hour ago," describes Amos.

Thus the Juneteenth performance celebration in Contra Costa County reflects the larger themes of the Juneteenth holiday: retaliation, personal empowerment, freedom, in many forms, and the betterment of a community. "Through the arts we have a huge opportunity to change people's awareness and impact cross cultural relations. This work has a solid effect on the community, as it allows people of all backgrounds to come together, learn, share and grow. We are proud to build cross cultural bridges and expose Contra Costa County to concert dance. By raising awareness of African American struggle and triumph, it highlights much of the joy and common experiences that we all share as Americans," reflects Amos.

The many facets of African American cultural diversity and awareness have flourished and grown so much from those first liberated slaves in the years following the Civil War. The past one-hundred-fifty years has seen growth, struggle, and empowerment in African American communities and other communities that share a downtrodden history. Through important events like Grown Women Dance Collective's Juneteenth performance, this trend of growth and awareness can only continue. Whatever the next one-hundred-fifty years brings, it will be thanks in part to performances like Juneteenth that prioritize educating, bridging, and ultimately celebrating the myriad of communities that compose our unique cultural identity.

Emmaly Wiedohlt moved to the Bay Area in 2008 to study under Summer Lee Rhatigan at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance. She currently dances with Malin- de LaVelle's Project Thrust and writes about dance for the San Francisco Examiner and for danceandondance.com. Photo courtesy of the artist.

"[It's the] power and beauty of concert dance and the cross-cultural bridges it can form." - Tonya Marie Amos

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