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A fiery evening of dance from modern Africa

A provocative glimpse of the artistry of modern African women is now on view via "Voices of Strength" at the Dance Center of Columbia College, a touring program starring a handful of contemporary dancers and their bold, arresting work.

Judging from this sampling, these are days of brash, in-your-face theatrics and embracing various international aesthetics. Two separate programs make up the package, including performances Saturday featuring Mozambique's Maria Helena Pinto and Bouchra Ouizguen's work turning on traditional Moroccan vocals. Thursday and Friday saw a different line-up, one alternately startling and witty in impact, leaving you begging for more visitors from this apparent cultural renaissance.

"Correspondences" boasted South Africa's Nelisiwe Xaba and Haitian-born Kettly Noel, who now works in Mali, in a sometimes tart, sometimes bold exploration of modern womanhood and friendship. "Quartiers Libres" is performed by Nadia Beugre, a fiery, zealous, compelling soloist from Cote d'Ivoire, who practically intimidates the audience into submission, a confrontational stance rarely employed this forcefully--or effectively--in dance.

Both works embrace heavy doses of performance art and theater. Beugre's countless plastic water bottles hang in part like a shimmering polyurethane curtain, while the rest are placed toward the rear as an orb-like cluster. Beugre obeys the old theatrical rule of not letting them just sit there: Eventually, she attacks the curtain and collapses into its midst. The cluster she dons as a cartoon tutu, a crackling cushion enabling her to collapse violently and repeatedly near the end.

But that arty set play is in juxtaposition to Beugre's otherwise ferocious and neo-primitive solo style, one given to spare mythic images, to be sure, but based in raw emotion and commanding personality. She wanders the audience, stopping to stare down some patrons, while her moves, persona and vocal sounds are fraught with pain and horror. She stuffs a garbage bag grotesquely into her mouth; elsewhere she shimmies with sly sex and irrepressible defiance.

"Correspondences" is a series of images and tropes, some more effective than others. But Xaba's witty opening is a sly satire on fashion consciousness and oppression, Noel's soliloquy on women is pertly socioeconomic and the stunning finale is a mini-spectacle with the women swimming the floor amidst an ocean of mother's milk.

"Voices of Strength" plays through Saturday at the Dance Center 1306 S. Michigan Ave. For tickets: 312-369-8330 or colum.edu/dancecenter.

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