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Racism's roots

Choreographer Haigood examines stereotypes and their slave trade origins in "The Monkey and the Devil"

Perform

'The Monkey and the Devil': Joanna Haigood and her Zaccho Dance Theatre put a new spin on racism, history

By **Nirmala Nataraj**
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

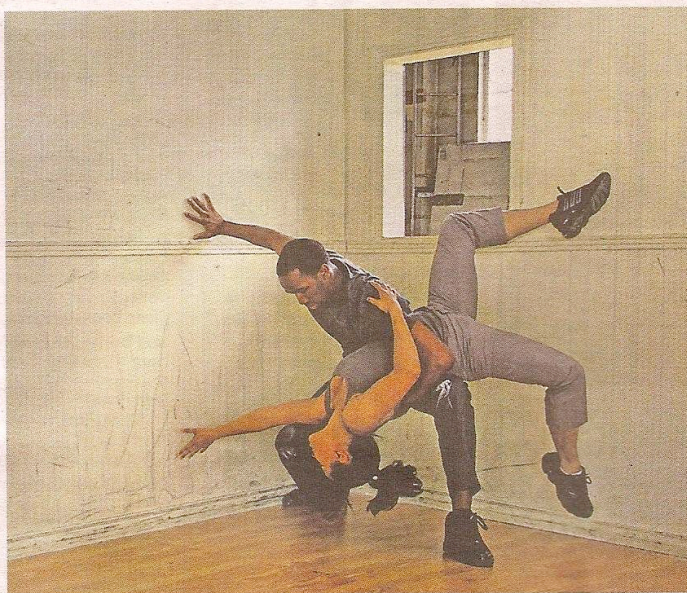
Choreographer Joanna Haigood explores wildly divergent ideas in her art form, from gentrification to the Underground Railroad to the exploration of time.

Now, Haigood and her 30-year-old Zaccho Dance Theatre present a performance that confronts racial stereotypes and the history of racism in the United States through a movement lexicon that is alternately chaotic and exhilarating.

"The Monkey and the Devil" looks at the ubiquitous nature of racism in popular culture. The title of the show stems from racial slurs that were common in the 1960s, when Haigood was growing up in New York. Haigood has spoken about how the show also draws upon her individual family history: The daughter of an African American father and German mother, Haigood recalls a tremendous amount of violence during the push for civil rights — and she says that much of the inequity of the world is still race-related, a factor that has been an important influence for her work.

"I've had a strong desire to understand history and my own place within my family and community," she says. "We've made some wonderful advances — we have a black president, and that is extraordinary — but we still have an amazing disparity in our justice and education systems. ... We still need to aggressively shift our psychology as it relates to the other."

While "The Monkey and the Devil" touches on everything from police brutality to "birther" conspiracy theories, the performance



Liz Hafalla / The Chronicle

Matthew Wickett and Raissa Simpson perform during a Monday dress rehearsal of "The Monkey and the Devil."

8 p.m. Fri., noon and 3 p.m. Sat.-Sun. Free. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, 701 Mission St., S.F. www.ybca.org.

is grounded in more mundane examples of bigotry. There is a section in the piece that is expressly about stereotypes.

"Some of the influences are drawn from actual conversations that you might hear on the street or in cafes," Haigood says. These range from conversations about the "myth of white privilege" to black people "speaking about the agenda of all white people to oppress blacks."

Haigood says that, in telling her stories, she draws on every tool possible "to express the idea in the clearest way — so I don't try to codify anything or to limit myself to any particular vocabulary." In this particular piece, she works with a hip-hop vernacular.

"Even though racism goes back hundreds of years, I wanted people to view it in a contemporary context, so I drew from the movement sensibility of young people ... the sense that any moment, things can collapse and fall apart. So a lot of it is about balance and unpredictability."

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