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Zab Maboungou's dance work Mozongi draws on deep African past

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African-contemporary-dance pioneer Zab Maboungou finds dancers from across the spectrum to perform her intricate patterns.

Photo : Kevin Calixte

It took Zab Maboungou 30 years and work across three continents before she was finally able to bring her dance back to the Republic of the Congo, the place where she first fell in love with her art form.

The Montreal artist had hoped to take the powerful, live-percussion-driven *Mozongi (Return)* to Congo way back when she created it 20 years ago. But it wasn't till this recent revival that the Paris-born, Brazzaville-trained choreographer was able to make it happen.

“See the time it takes to realize our dreams?” the Canadian dance icon says to the *Straight* with a laugh, speaking over the phone before *Mozongi* travels to Vancouver. “I hadn't been back since 1988. I took my time to take it back to Congo. I wanted to use that distance to really give myself time to see that training of where I grew up and learned to dance.

“You see, time is my main theme: time, life, death are almost all I deal with as a choreographer. And I use my perspective of living on three continents. Space is something I see also from the inside.”

Maboungou was thrilled to hear the musicians there comment on the complexity of the work. “They were amazed at the patterns and rhythms—and this is a place of rhythms, Africa!” she tells the *Straight*.

“And for dancers you can imagine how rewarding it was: they were able to finally understand these transcultural things I'm projecting on them.”

It's been a long journey for Maboungou, a pioneer of African contemporary dance in Canada who trained in postrevolutionary Congo, then returned to France to study dance further before heading to Montreal and finally launching her company there 30 years ago. African dance was all but unknown in the Quebec city then. From the beginning, she has fought the pigeonholing of ethnic or folk traditions, instead insisting on being seen as a contemporary artist who draws on the dance and gestures of central Africa. And in *Mozongi*, the hypnotic magic she creates has as much to do with the energized, earth-bound, and intricately patterned choreography for her five dancers as with the live sounds and movement of the two percussionists on-stage.



Mozongi by Montreal choreographer Zab Maboungou.

Photo : Kevin Calixte

“For me, dance has to be fully live and I want to take away the idea of recorded music,” she says, adding that this is still a new concept for Canadian dance audiences and artists. “I was challenged on this: ‘This is music, this is not dance.’ For 30 years it’s been a fight, and then there’s calling it contemporary dance on top of that!”

Maboungou says she tells her musicians they’re just as much a part of the work as the dancers, a fact audiences will hear, see, and feel when *Mozongi* comes here.

As for her dancers, the choreographer draws them from across the spectrum of contemporary, hip-hop, and African backgrounds.

“They don’t come from the same tradition, so you can see the challenge for me,” says Maboungou, who trains her troupe in her own technique. “When people audition with me, I look for a sense of music, rhythm, articulating gestures in space. With one

contemporary dancer, I saw it in her eyes.”

Maboungou is clearly creating in the here and now, developing dance that is exciting and new, even as she draws on the rich, diverse movement traditions of the land she left so long ago.

“In the studio, I have to be able to be open and respond with the real people. I’m not just projecting a dance that I have in my head,” she explains. “You’re really working with the person, and that is already a very contemporary approach. What I do doesn’t rest on traditional repertoire.”