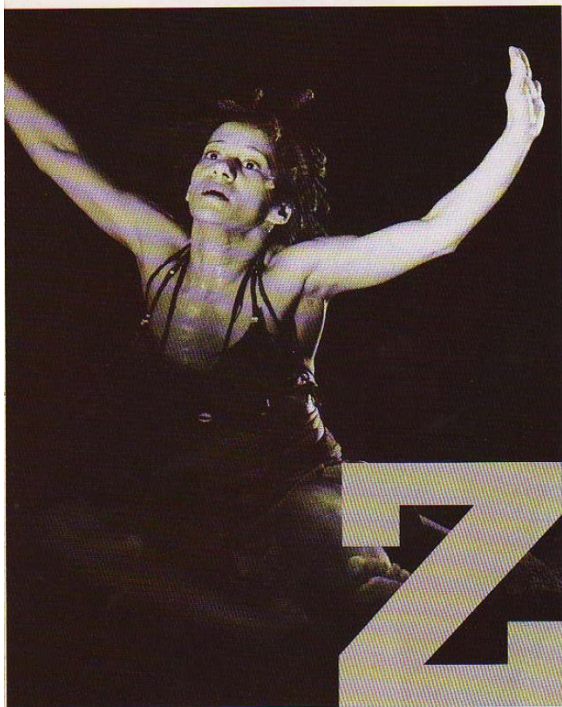


When someone declares with certitude,  
**“Dance allows the individual to really  
state her/his position in the world,”** she gets your attention.  
When that person goes on to assert that **“traditional African dance  
is contemporary in the deepest sense,”**  
you are intrigued.



**T**hese are the convictions of Zab Maboungou – choreographer, teacher of African dance and college professor of philosophy who earned degrees in Paris and Montreal. Born in Brazzaville, Congo, Zab has danced all her life – in the village with her relatives, with various troupes in Africa and now, with Montreal as her base, she teaches and performs extensively. From Mali to Congo, Ghana to Singapore, London to Paris. Zab and her troupe use African dance to create an authentic exchange with world audiences.

For Zab, African dance is an expression of life in its deepest, most fundamental form. She remarks, “Through dance, we learn how to cure as well as

elevate ourselves. In traditional Africa, there are specific rhythms for everything: for healing, for celebrating births of all sorts, initiation, death, marriage and much more.”

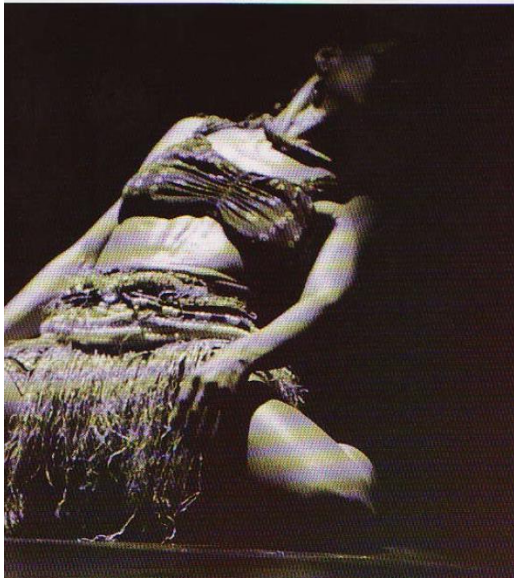
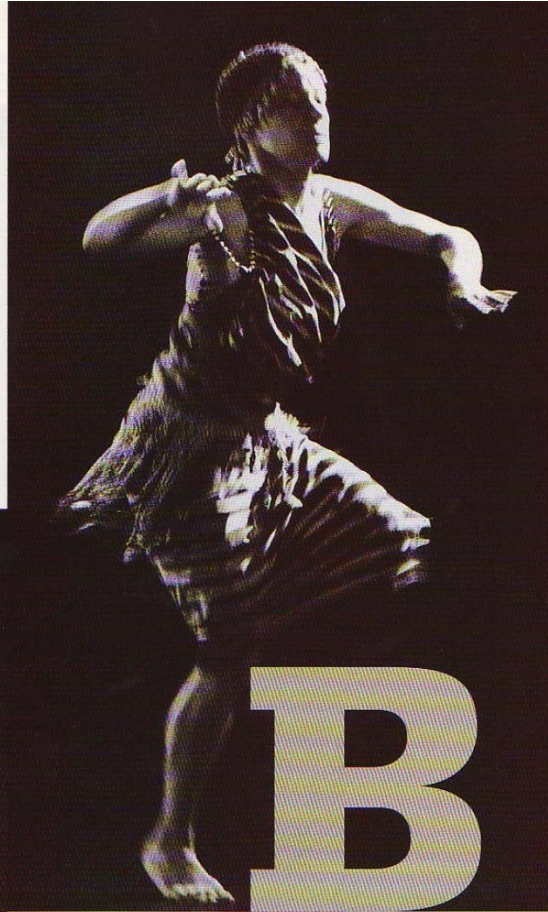
As a young dancer, Zab found herself becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the performances of African national dance companies, which she felt had become politicised, presenting folklore with the energy and excitement that pleased western audiences, reducing culture to postcard proportions. That was not the meaning of dance as she knew it. So she started to research the physical and spiritual principles underpinning the dances she had grown up with.

Zab believes that African traditions, far from being fixed, hold within themselves the keys to transformation. Central to transformation is the capacity for improvisation, which she considers to be the main criterion for excellence in the African Arts – painting, visual, theatre, dance and even literature. Her views on improvisation are a far cry from the fatuous cliché that African dancing really gives you an opportunity to “let it all hang out.” She contends: “Those rhythms are not ‘simple, natural, animal pulsations’ as some critics declare. They are sophisticated, codified, rhythmic sequences that call other rhythmic sequences. We learn to break the codes – but we can do so only when we really assimilate them, really understand them. One specific structure transforms into another structure, stretching, not losing the original structure.”

Countering the beliefs that African rhythms and dance are based on a law of repetition, Zab maintains that the law is one of progression not repetition: “No living thing in the world repeats itself. With these rhythms you learn the art of beginning again, within a structure that is organised you re-edit all the time with your living self. And that’s very contemporary.”

Improvisation allows us to really survive, literally creating time and keeping up the spirit. I believe that that is basically why black people all over the world were able to survive, even in bondage. I think the key to their survival was this idea of rhythm and of being linked to the universe, to the larger picture. Your life is not just your life here – it's always expanding. Improvisation is, therefore, a process intrinsically linked to the dynamics of life."

She discusses the importance of the drum: "The drum is a language of life. You recognise from the drum where your emotions are placed. Some rhythms go here," she says pointing to her belly. "Some go to the chest. They travel from place to place and lead us to open up and explore. I have to teach the students how to



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channel these rhythms rather than resist them. The drum has power, so you have to learn how to respond. That is call and response. Anything that deals with life deals with your ability to dialogue and exchange with your environment which is constantly moving. It's dancing with you – it's not waiting for you!"

Central to traditional African dance is the circle. "The circle of dance is fundamentally democratic. You can be there with your grandfather, but you're no longer his granddaughter in the circle of dance. All dancers are

equal, whether they're 4, 19 or 70. Each of us goes into that circle of dance for our own purpose. We carry our own life, discover our position as human beings and find our real weight in the world. When you dance, show your weight. What is your gesture?" she instructs her students:

To western students who feel unequipped to dance to African rhythms she retorts, "There is no rhythm in the world that is going to accept you unless you bring your own rhythm. Your heart is beating, There is a ▶ 79