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[JOURNAL] Interview: Nora Chipaumire and the Bessie Awards

By ceyuhas

15 minutes with Nora Chipaumire

With two Bessie Awards already under her belt (one in 2007 for her performance with Urban Bush Women, the other in 2008 for her choreographic work Chimurenga*), Nora Chipaumire could be deemed an expert on groundbreaking dance in New York City. During a quiet morning of her current residency at the University of Minnesota, she was kind enough to share a few words concerning her career, her own Bessie experiences and her thoughts on this year's ceremony.*

YAC: So you have a lot going on these days, between teaching, performing and creating new work...and your pieces are very multi-dimensional. How do you continually motivate yourself, and keep your ideas fresh?

NC: Oh my goodness...well, I'm hungry, for one! I'm broke and hungry (*laughing*)...so that's some motivation right there, you know? And really, I feel like the issues that matter to me have not been resolved, and probably won't be resolved for a very long time...and I'm constantly trying to figure out how to talk about those things. So it's a combination of just being a hungry artist, and feeling a little desire to continue to address issues that are crucial to who I am. That's what keeps me going.

YAC: In terms of your choreography, who would you say are your biggest influences?

NC: Well, Pina Baucsh and her Tanztheater Wuppertal, and Franco Luambo Makiadi, those are my biggest influences. And I have to say that African artists like Franco, who is a musician from the Congo...just the way they are able to comment on history or society or culture and bring about change in a danceable groove...in an accessible groove...that to me is such a huge gift. I'm really inspired by people who are able to take what they do very seriously, and who really believe what they do. It's not just an act, it's not just an academic exercise or a theory...it's *real.* Those are the people I look up to, and aspire to emulate.

YAC: Artists who are truly able to create change and open peoples' eyes with their work...which I think we all would love to accomplish, but it's extremely difficult...

NC: ...it's *so* difficult! And while making great, not just good, but *great* art at the same time...it's monumental when you think about it.

YAC: Turning to the Bessie Awards...You were awarded at the Bessies in 2007 (for your work with Urban Bush Women) and 2008 (for your own *Chimurenga*) – what was your initial reaction when you received these accolades?

NC: Well, the first time [Bessie Award for Performance] was a huge, huge surprise. I thought I was just going to the awards to celebrate other friends and artists...when my name was called, I almost had a heart attack! (*laughing*) I just couldn't believe that people were seeing *me* dance. I never think about that, or feel the audience watching me. I felt honored and shocked to be singled out from an amazing group of women...it was truly a joyous experience.

YAC: And your second award?

NC: For the choreography award I knew I was being considered, so I was at the ready beforehand...but because it was an honor for *my* work, it was that much more of a validation. And choreography is what I do, it's really who I am. So yeah, that one was awesome, like crossing the finish line and getting that gold medal! And with the work that I do, which is very political, very outsider, coming from another place...the fact that people care about these issues speaks a lot about the people in dance and the people who are seeing the work. It gives me a lot of courage.

YAC: As you probably know, the Bessies are undergoing a bit of an overhaul this year – namely, being expanded to include artists and performances outside of the "downtown" modern dance scene...your thoughts on this expansion? Do you think this is a positive move?

NC: I think we're in a brave new world now with dance. Economies have collapsed globally, and people are trying to figure out how to keep working. Maybe this is the way to go, to keep the Bessies alive...open them up, broaden the sphere, and bring more people to them. I think it's all about finding a balance, about trying something new while still paying tribute to experimental artists on the margins of the field. It is nice to have an all-inclusive Bessie, but not forgetting the reason why the award was created in the first place. But kudos to the people who are producing the awards, and who have brought them back...just to have them back is really quite glorious.

YAC: Any of your own Bessie predictions to make? In other words, are there any standout artists/performances that have caught your eye in the last two years?

NC: Well I'm going to be totally ridiculous here for a minute and say, my *"lions...'"* was kick ass! (*laughs*) That work was really a huge personal accomplishment. But also, the Ralph Lemon platform, "I Get Lost", I felt was very fantastic. Reggie Wilson's work too, "The Good Dance: Dakar/Brooklyn" was extremely inspiring, extremely grounded. Both of these events caught my attention, definitely.

YAC: Lastly, being a Bessie Award recipient yourself, why do you think these awards are so important to our field?

NC: As an individual artist, getting a Bessie, getting that recognition from fellow artists and people who love dance...it's very, very rewarding. It gives me the gas to go into new situations saying 'I'm Nora Chipaumire and I think I know what I'm talking about!' (*laughing)* Truly, it is a validating honor. And as a whole, the awards bring more needed attention to our field. Dance is vital. It has a definite place in the global arts and in government, even in science...because dance is a science, it's a beautiful science. There's a lot of power there, and it's wonderful that the Bessies can shed some light on that.

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