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ARTS & CULTURE

'REFLECTIONS' DANCE FESTIVAL: A GIFT OF INDIGENOUS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLIDARITY

NOVEMBER 3, 2021 | EDITOR

by Kathya Alexander

This year's "Reflections" Dance Festival was filmed in September, bringing the light and sunshine of the summer into the fall to be shared when we need it most. It is a love letter to our beautiful city written in ceremony, ritual, and dance, giving testament to the ways art can heal and transform us even during our darkest days.

Jordan Remington is a Quileute tribe member and community engagement and programs coordinator of Friends of Waterfront Seattle (Friends). Davida Ingram is the Seattle Public Library's public engagements program manager. Last year they came together to build Indigenous and Black solidarity through arts and culture.

Their collaboration created a unique gift to the City of Seattle — [Reflections Dance Festival](#) — in partnership with [Friends of Waterfront Seattle](#), [Seattle Public Library \(SPL\)](#), [Seattle Art Museum](#), [Seattle Office of Arts & Culture \(OAC\)](#), and [Office of the Waterfront and Civic Projects](#).



Makeda Ebube with Lungusu Malonga's Traditional Congolese Ensemble for "Reflections." (Photo: Futsum Tsegai, courtesy of Seattle Public Library)

Before the pandemic, Ingram began a research project where she talked to BIPOC communities about how they would like to see BIPOC cross-cultural conversation happen at the library and OAC. Over and over again, what people said they really wanted was an acknowledgement of Native American and Black communities. Around that same time, within his role at Friends, Remington had started having some conversations about how he could build off that research and connect it to community engagement work that SPL had done.

Remington said, "One of the things that came out of that was this idea of dance being a way of bring-

ing people together and also conveying stories and emotions. So we talked about doing a dance festival.”

“And for me as an artist, who is also an art administrator, who lives on Indigenous lands and who is part of a community that was torn from their ancestral ties in the violent way that chattel slavery did, I always noticed that we don’t get a lot of opportunities to have cultural protocols between the Native American community, Indigenous communities of Turtle Island,” said Ingram, referring to the name for Earth and/or North America used by some Indigenous peoples and activists in Canada and the United States. “And if I’m an African daughter of Turtle Island, what does that mean to be in a right relationship?”

Because of the history of colonization, there has been a lot of division between Black and Indigenous groups. Remington points out that one of the strategies of colonization was to divide and conquer by having communities emotionally and physically separated from each other. So he and Ingram are trying to mend those divisions and bring the communities back together, recognizing ways in which they can work together to better their communities and bring healing.

The plan was to have an in-person event, but then COVID-19 happened. But the pandemic, because of its disproportionate impact on Black and Indigenous communities, actually gave the communities an incentive to work together in a new way.

“COVID has been really culturally specific,” Ingram said. “Every [BIPOC] group in some way, shape, form, or fashion was connected to a community that had disproportionate impact with COVID, whether it was death rate or not having access to health care the way their communities needed it.”

For perhaps the first time, the pandemic made BIPOC communities have to put their lives on the line for each other. This was a time when they literally had to take care of each other’s health. BIPOC communities worked together to protect frontline essential workers, increase mutual aid support, and facilitate vaccine awareness and drives. As a result, King County announced in August that they were the first large county in the country to get at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine to at least 70% of all eligible age groups and racial groups, with Indigenous communities having over a 90% vaccination rate.

All the artists in “Reflections” came with morale boosting content, but also with ways for the larger community to understand what their communities were thinking about and going through during the pandemic. The [Pasifika Wayfinders](#) Dance ensemble, which includes dancers with heritages from Fiji, Tonga, the Marshall Islands, Chuuk, Hawai’i, and Samoa, brings stories of ancestors from each of the Pacific Islands and also uplifts the public health work of their young leaders in vaccine drives. Tloke-Nahuake presented a sacred prayer and also worked to ensure that both Latinx and Indigenous communities were protected during the pandemic.

“Not everybody had a mutual aid focus, but that part was intentionally woven in with the cultural presentations,” Ingram said.



Pasifika Wayfinders for “Reflections.” (Photo: Futsum Tsegai, courtesy of Seattle Public Library)

Last year’s “Reflections”— which was shifted to an online event in response to COVID-19 — had an opening night audience of over 3,000 people and over 5,000 people viewed the presentations overall. In its second year, “Reflections” recognizes that the city is still in recovery and the presentations reflect the artists’ advocacy around that recovery.

Ingram said, “At the beginning of the pandemic, we learned that artists lost about a million dollars of revenue in the first month of COVID. And so just as much as it’s a love letter to the city, ‘Reflections’ is a love letter to artists of color.”

Elisa Murray, SPL’s digital communications strategist, said, “The pandemic has been an especially interesting time because our buildings closed for months. And so we were faced with this question of, without these buildings, how do we serve people and what does that mean? And we pivoted in a lot of different ways and we did a lot of things that we’re proud of, including this kind of virtual programming, that for some communities will make our programs more accessible.”

“Reflections” Dance Festival will be presented as a virtual event on Nov. 4. Filmed at Pier 62, the inaugural site of Seattle’s future Waterfront Park, the 20-acre public park along Seattle’s downtown central shoreline is designed to create places for people to come together to enjoy the natural beauty of the Puget Sound region.

Filmed again this year by Futsum Tsegai, filmmaker and artist-in-residence for the Seattle Public Library, the festival is using the pre-recorded videos mixed with live conversations with the artists about the pieces and their themes and meaning. So make sure you don’t miss opening night! It is free and open to the public, [Thursday, Nov. 4 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.](#) For more information on the artists, click on the links in the article.

Editors’ Note: This article has been updated to correct the name of “Friends of Waterfront Seattle.”

A previous version of this article implied that all the dancers of from Pasifika Wayfinders were Indigenous Fijian. This article was updated on 11/05/2021 to recognize the other diverse Pasifika heritages of the dance ensemble.



*Kathya Alexander is a writer, actor, storyteller, and teaching artist. Her writing has appeared in various publications like ColorsNW Magazine and Arkana Magazine. She has won multiple awards including the Jack Straw Artist Support Program Award. Her collection of short stories, *Angel In The Outhouse*, is available on Amazon.*

 *Featured Image: Tloke-Nahuake for “Reflections.” (Photo: Futsum Tsegai, courtesy of Seattle Public Library)*

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