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| Glasser, Sylvia (b. 1940, Polokwane, South Africa – ) |
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| Over the course of a career that stretches across from the regime of apartheid through the transition and into the establishment of a democratic republic, Sylvia Glasser has contributed significantly to dance and education in South Africa. As ‘Magogo’ or ‘Mother’ to the dancers in her company and training programmes, Glasser contested the separatist premises of apartheid and made manifest, without militancy, with bodies in movement, cultures that were banished by apartheid. Glasser received the 1996 fnb vita Special Achievement Award for her development of a unique, dynamic South African contemporary choreographic practice and dance style and for her company’s ongoing dance education and outreach programmes in the communities. She was honoured as South African ‘National Living Human Treasure and Foremost Pioneer’ in 2000; garnered the Tunkie Arts and Culture Trust Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005; and earned the National Tribute to Women in the Arts and Culture Sector in 2010 for her contributions to South African modern dance and to society’s fabric. At the forefront of South African modern dance from the late 1970s onwards, Glasser’s explorations of South African rituals, music and dance together with her training in Western modern dance led her to develop a distinct style she calls Afrofusion, which reflects her philosophy of integrity and respectful cultural sensitivity and that blends elements from South African culture with various choreographic structures underpinning Western modern dance. |
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Photo: John Hogg Training and Early Work Glasser’s life’s work testifies to the powerful impact of the arts on the lives of young South Africans. In 1978, she defied the Immorality and Group Areas Acts of 1950 and the Separate Amenities and Bantu Education Acts of 1953, when she founded what has since become Moving into Dance Mophatong (midm) as a non-racial dance company. In the garage of her home in the white suburb of Victory Park, in northern Johannesburg, Glasser brought together dancers of then legally segregated races and used dance as a form of pacific resistance. When in 1987, the company moved to the first accessible to all, non-racial Braamfontein’s Recreation Centre with its large studio at nominal rent, Glasser established the ‘Edudance’ programme whose pedagogical aims sought to educate the whole person by using dance as a tool to teach general school subjects and life skills. By 1992 mid mophatong (meaning ‘initiation lodge’ or ‘school’ in Sesotho) had developed a full-time community dance teachers’ training course which offered a nurturing environment and preparation for careers in dance and the entertainment industry; and in 2009 it moved into Phil Mashabane’s state of the art building in Johannesburg’s integrated neighbourhood of Newton. With its defining Afrofusion style, midm has become a leading training and professional dance institution in South Africa.  File: Luyanda Sidiya & sonia Radebe in Blankets of shame.jpg  Figure Luyanda Sidiya & sonia Radebe in Blankets of Shame  Along with other such leading women dancers as Sonje Mayo (1945 – ) who founded Jazzart dance studio in Cape Town in 1973, and Sue Parker who then developed the school into the Jazzart Contemporary Dance Company in 1978, Glasser led the way for South African-born dancers and socio-politically active choreographers to bridge the political colour divide. These artists includeAlfred Hinkle (1953 – ) whose exposure to social African dance in Namaqualand led him to stage the multi-racial casts of Jazzart Dance Theatre productions as socio-political vehicles for protest under apartheid (1986-94) in Cape Town; and Durban-born cultural activist Jay Pather (1959 – ) who as Jazzart’s resident choreographer in the late 1980s and early 1990s and then as Artistic Director of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre (1996 – ) has built on Glasser’s modern dance vocabulary to create postmodern works with kinetic and visual juxtapositions of multi-genre choreographic practices, physical rhetoric, iconography and mixed media that position the personal at the heart of the political.  File: 500Threads\_FanaTshabalala\_PhotobyJohnHogg.jpg  Figure 500 Threads Fana Tshabalala. Photo: John Hogg  After benefitting as a child from subsidies from South Africa’s National Party government to learn British ballet and American tap dancing, Glasser moved to England and then to the US where she studied European national dance, creative movement and American modern dance. She learnt to experiment with expressive movements and visual forms in New York in the 1970s at the Graham, Cunningham and Hawkins schools and later with choreographic processes from Murray Louis and Alwin Nikolais in 1984. She taught ballet and modern dance from 1963 onwards and started choreographing for the Experimental Dance Theatre, which she founded in 1967. These early works were strongly influenced by American modern dance figures Martha Graham, José Limón, Merce Cunningham, and Erick Hawkins. Having obtained her diploma and analysis practice from the London College of Dance and Drama (1959-63), a B.A. in English Language and Classical Life and Thought from the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg (1973), choreographic training from Jan Simmonds and an M.A. from the University of Houston-Clear Lake City, TX. (1977), Glasser returned to South Africa to explore a language of dance that reflected her training in modern dance and her South African identity before teaching for six months in Sydney, Australia. To develop her early interest in African culture which stemmed from her father’s gifts of artifacts, the African dancing she occasionally witnessed at the mines growing up, and from the 1959 South African all black jazz opera *King Kong* about heavyweight boxer Ezekiel Dlamini, she enrolled in a three-year course of study of the San people’s culture and art at Wits.    File: Sylvia Glasser photo by John Hogg.jpg  Figure Sylvia Glasser. Photo: John Hogg  With its all white female cast and its choreographic fusion of traditional African music and dance with Western modern dance, Glasser’s *Primal Pulse*, which was first created in Houston in 1977 and then showed before a white audience at the Box Theatre at Wits in 1978, pointed to the discrimination undergirding the conventions of South African theatrical dance. In 1979, Benjy Francis invited Glasser to teach modern dance at the newly established Federated Union of Black Artists (fuba) Academy on Saturday mornings, and she soon insisted that the four black male students who wished to perform in her pieces be allowed to rehearse in her garage on Saturday afternoons with the company. Their integration marked the beginning of midm as a non-racial organization. However the education department’s refusal to fund a mixed group meant that Glasser could not support more than five black dancers in a company of fourteen performers until the repeal of the Separate Amenities Act in 1986 and the 1987 move to the Braamfontein Recreation Centre.  File: Declan Randall lighting photo of Threads.bmp  Figure Declan Randall lighting photo of Threads Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Through anthropological research, the decoding of kinetic practices and symbols, the incorporation of musical poly-rhythms, and borrowings from Western contemporary dance forms, Glasser’s choreographic practice brings to performance a corporeal understanding of cultural sources and aesthetic traditions in modernist terms that emphasize embodiment over narrative. Inspired by various South African civilizations and rituals like those of the San, the Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa, and Venda peoples, Glasser refuses the exclusionary physical forms and codified artifices of ballet, as well as the simplistic exotic, colonial and post-colonial appropriations of others’ cultures by returning agency to the body and foregrounding concerns with the human condition. Continuously intersecting dance lexica and syntax reflective of the South African context with those of Western cultures, she formulates choreography as a progressive process of understanding, elaboration, selection and fusion and one that includes the complete staging of a work – set design, costumes, lighting, music, text, etc. – in collaboration with musicians, singers, poets, artists, dancers, and other movement practitioners from differing traditions and diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.  File: Luyana Sidiya and Sonia Radebe in Blankets of Shame.jpg  Figure Luyana Sidiya and Sonia Radebe in Blankets of Shame  *Tranceformations* (1991), which was nominated for a Vita Choreography Award and is one of Glasser’s core choreographic works, is a thirty-minute ritual journey for twelve dancers (ten black and two white Africans) with music composed by Shoun Naidoo and sets and costumes by Sara Roberts. Developed after her anthropological study at Wits (1987-90), the piece references the superimpositions seen in the rock art of the San people, contextualises the repetitious elements of their healing rituals and maintains the hallucinatory effect of their trance-dances’ key metaphors. This dance, whose title alludes to the transformation of the individual and of the dance form itself as well as to the ritual healers’ trances, explores and layers their physical sensations and visualisations with borrowed symbolic gestures from the trance dance and rock art fused with other African and modern dance movements. This foundational piece, created to pay tribute to and to situate the plight of the dispossessed San in present day South Africa, is regularly restaged by the company as a living testament to Glasser’s choreographic practice and philosophy.  To mark midm’s 30th anniversary, Glasser collaborated with the Noma award-winning poet Lebo Mashile to explore generational and gender relationships, and the complex of cultural and artistic identity in South African society. Developed through intensive research and writing together, *Threads* (2008) emerged as a cultural cross-media hybrid that infuses poetic voice into dance and motion into poetry to make manifest the abstract forces that join us as human beings.  File: tranceformations Sylvia glasser.jpg  Figure tranceformations Sylvia glasser Legacy Glasser is recognized as an influential mentor and teacher to acclaimed South African performers and choreographers, including Carly Dibakoane who formed the Soweto Dance Project and Felicity de Jager who joined Dance Theatre of Harlem. Although Glasser was predominantly responsible until 1991 for the development of the company’s repertoire, in 1992 its own graduates assumed choreographic and directorship roles. Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe, Gregory Vuyani Maqoma, Luyanda Sidiya, Shanel Winlock and Nhlanhla Moses Mahlangu have since variously trained in Europe primarily, developed international careers, established their own companies, returned regularly to create pieces with dancers following in their footsteps at midm, and showcased their work at the annual fnb dance festival in Johannesburg. As teacher, choreographer, writer, and social anthropologist of dance, Glasser broke with the mono-culture of apartheid, re-examined the indigenous history and traditional arts of her locality. She seeks new inter-racial forms of expression, experiments with borrowing and translation from one culture to another as she creates for and with the strengths of each of her dancers asking them to take emotional and physical risks to embody different social and movement practices. As the signature style of MID Mophatong, Afrofusion – the transgressive modern dance form Sylvia Glasser pioneered to counter apartheid’s ideology of cultural separateness – continues to reflect her choreographic philosophy of respectful and knowledgeable integration of African dance, music and ritual with dance forms from around the world, as well as her belief in dance’s power to be communally and personally transformative, and to inform the practice of South African contemporary dance.  List of key works  (from over fifty original works from 1963 onwards)  *Primal Pulse* (1978) – first performed in 1977 in Houston, Texas, with an American cast.  *There’s a Dream Dreaming Us* (1984)  *Paths of Sound* (1991)  *Tranceformations* (1991) – nominated AA Vita Choreography Award  *Stone Cast Ritual* (1994) – fnb vita choreographer of the Year Award  *Sophiatown* (1996/2000)  *Passage of rites* (1997)  *WoMooniCity* (2000)  *M is for* (2001)  *Blankets of Shame* (2006) – nominated AA Vita Choreography Award  *Threads* (2008) |
| Further reading:  (Glasser)  (Glasser, Appropriation and Appreciation)  (Glasser, Transcultural Transformations)  (Heppner)  (Waterman) |