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Collage Dance Collective ballet company reflects black experience in choreography, theater, spoken word

By Jeff Rauschert | Flint Journal

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For nearly a dozen years, Kevin Thomas has played almost every major role in Flint Institute of Music's production of "The Nutcracker."

On Friday, Thomas returns to Flint to perform with Collage Dance Collective, a New York-based dance company he co-founded with Marcellus Harper. The performance will be at 8 p.m. at the University of Michigan-Flint Theatre.

The eight-member troupe also will conduct master classes and/or workshops at Michigan School for the Deaf, Genesee Regional Detention Center, Flint School of Performing Arts and the University of Michigan-Flint.

Thomas described Collage as a contemporary ballet company that integrates modern, contemporary and classical dance using movement, theater and spoken word. The mission is to showcase choreography reflecting the experiences of blacks, he said.

"We're trying to fill a void left by the Dance Theatre of Harlem," said Thomas, a former principal dancer with that well-known company. DTH's professional company has been inactive since June 2004, a spokesperson said. A smaller troupe called the Dance Theatre of Harlem Ensemble will begin touring in 2009.

"We don't have the support yet to fill that void," Thomas added. "It's going to take us some more time. In the meantime, we're focusing on our outreach programs, workshops and master classes."

Preview

Collage Dance Collective

- **Where:** University of Michigan-Flint Theatre
- **When:** 8 p.m. Friday
- **Tickets:** \$26; student rush tickets, \$12, available the day of the performance, available online, www.TheWhiting.com
- **Details:** (810) 237-7333 or (800) 8-CENTER

Harper pointed out that DTH "blazed a trail for black classically trained dancers. It gave them a platform to showcase their abilities."

The Collage Dance Collective's performance in Flint features six pieces in a range of styles. The show opens with a pas de deux (work for two dancers) that is "very modern," Thomas said.

"The costumes are interesting. They (the dancers) look as if they're draped in netting." The female dancers will perform in bare feet, he said.

In contrast, the women will wear dresses and dance en pointe for the final number titled "Capricious Chase," Thomas noted. The neoclassical, contemporary work is choreographed by Thaddeus Davis, a former Dance Theatre of Harlem dancer.



Courtesy photo

Sonny Robinson, Alicia Graf and Kip Sturm perform in the ballet "Adagietto."

Dancers from the Collage Dance Collective first performed together at a festival in Manchester, Vt., in 2004, said Thomas, a native of Trinidad. They performed there again in 2005.

Their inaugural performance as Collage Dance Collective was in February 2007 in Kansas City, Mo.

"It was a success -- the audience loved it, and we received great reviews," Thomas said. Thomas joined DTH in 1995 and was promoted to principal dancer in 1999.

He also appeared on Broadway in "The Phantom of the Opera." His recent choreography includes "Spirit of Light," which fused dance, vocals and spoken word. It premiered in New York City.

Thomas returns to Flint during the holidays to perform as the Cavalier in FIM's production of "The Nutcracker." Some of the dancers from Collage Dance Collective will perform with him in the classic ballet.

He admits that it's difficult to sustain a dance troupe in this economic climate.

"We just keep on asking for help (from donors and supporters)," he said. "I'm optimistic."

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