



New voices in indigenous dance

Performance series explores First Nations identities around the globe.

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Since the first arrival of European colonizers, indigenous art and dance in the Americas have faced constant and often brutal repression. In contemporary society, asserting indigenous artistic heritage can function as both cultural therapy and resistance to the ongoing marginalization of aboriginal people.

Last week, four indigenous choreographers of diverse origins, spanning from Bolivia to Mexico to Canada, performed “Vents nouveaux,” a series of contemporary dance pieces that engaged in the project of honouring the creators’ collective aboriginal identities. The performance, hosted by Montréal, arts interculturels (MAI) was put on by Manitowapan Productions, a non-profit group that seeks to give opportunity to emerging aboriginal choreographers and promote contemporary aboriginal dance. As founder and director, Gaétan Gingras, wrote in his artistic statement, “Dedicated to exploring my heritage through personal journeys into native stories, beliefs, and rituals, I strive to create modern expressions of my ancestors’ culture.”

Choreographer Lara Kramer, of maternal Ojibwa and Cree ancestry, testified to the disintegration of Aboriginal identity in Canada over the past decades. “I didn’t grow up with a strong sense of indigenous identity,” she said. “There was a big stigma attached to my indigenous identity and I think that completely derived from my mother having grown up in the institution of the residential schools, where it was imposed on her that there was this undertone of being ashamed of being aboriginal.”

For “Vents nouveaux,” Kramer put together a piece entitled *Fragments* to explore the impact of the residential school system on her people, and provide a form of cultural and personal healing through dance. Kramer, along with three other dancers, used brisk, powerful movements to expose the horrors of her mother’s experience. As educational props such as desks and chalkboards filled the room, an audio recording of the ages and deaths of the children in residential schools transported the audience into a different time, making the

recounted atrocities vividly alive and real. “The message I’m trying to send is really passing on knowledge through art and...for me, it’s also a way to give honour to my mother’s experience and the stories that I’ve heard throughout my life,” said Kramer.

Another work, *Sky Woman and the Three Sisters Tionhékhwen*, returned to traditional aboriginal folklore for its source material. The creator of the piece, Barbara Diabo of the Mohawk nation, was influenced and propelled by the Mohawk creation story in which Sky Woman (the first person on Earth), fell from the sky and, from the soil of her buried daughter, grew three sisters – corn, beans and squash – who together became the supporters of the land. With soil, plants, and earthy tones, Diabo and three other dancers depicted the story of birth and life from her indigenous heritage.

The night was not restricted, however, to Canadian aboriginal stories. *Le Bleu de Ciel*, a multimedia work, was created by Karina Iraola, a choreographer of Bolivian and Spanish descent. *Àngeles... in situ*, by Mexican choreographer Talía Leos, combined two musicians, three dancers and a young boy to portray the clashing and intersecting of universes as Mexican identity encountered life in Quebec. As musicians banged drums and chanted to the fluid and powerful movements of the interpreters, semi-nude slides of the dancers swimming underwater flashed across the backdrop.

While these four young women hail from different places and deal with various origins, their raw emotions and stories all share the common goal of fusing their indigenous heritage with contemporary dance. These performances encapsulated the goals of Manitowapan Productions. Gingras wrote, “By focusing on finding bridges between spiritual and physical I hope to spark healing processes for some or simply make magic of dance a true experience for others.”