

Maria DuBois Genné.
Photo: MM Nelson



Kairos Dance Theatre makes a world

Maria DuBois Genné, artistic director of Kairos, intergenerational dance company, sets out her and the company's values and priorities

I first met Ida Arbeit when her son David called me up on the phone. He and his wife were moving his mother to St. Paul from New York City. "My mother danced with Helen Tamiris in the 1930s," he said. "We heard about your company and we thought you might be interested in meeting her."

"Of course," I responded, "I'd love to meet her." Little did I know then that meeting Ida would steer the direction of Kairos Dance Theatre to collaborating and performing with this firecracker of a woman and at the same time take us back to Harlem where American artists birthed truly American art.

The petite and ebullient Ida, who just turned 100 years old, gestured dramatically from her chair one day and told us this story:

"I've learned to laugh each day. I could be crying, but I know that if you laugh the whole world laughs with you. Come on let's laugh! I always wanted to be a dancer. I'd do anything to dance. I was in a dance company with Helen Tamiris in New York City. What a tall gorgeous creature she was! When she jumped you thought she would never come down. We performed with her on Broadway. We had regular jobs as dancers. I got paid \$50 per week. One time I left the theatre and took a taxi to the 92nd Street Y to do an audition. I was still in costume. I came out on stage, and sang and danced, 'It's Me, It's Me Oh Lord, Standing in the Need of Prayer.' I brought the house down. Most of those other dancers, like Martha Graham, weren't happy," Ida contracted and contorted her body in her chair to demonstrate. "Me – I came in, and sang and danced, and the audience laughed and laughed."

Ida has had a long career. As a young woman in the 1930s, she danced in the company of American modern dance pioneer Helen Tamiris who was a leader for the Work

Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Dance Project. Under President Franklin Roosevelt, the WPA provided employment to artists and others during the Great Depression from 1936-1939. Tamiris was a contemporary of Martha Graham and Ida performed in the Tamiris show *Look Home Brethren* on Broadway, dancing to spirituals and protest songs. Tamiris was one of the first American choreographers to use jazz and spiritual music to explore social themes in dance. On off-evenings, Ida and her friends travelled to Harlem for the music and nightlife. Since arriving in the Twin Cities (St. Paul and Minneapolis) two years ago, Ida has been collaborating with my company, Kairos Dance Theatre. With her we mounted a show this year, *Ida Dances with Irv*, which premiered on 18 April 2010 along with the Irv Williams Quartet and gospel singer, Tom Tipton, to a standing room only, sold-out singing, dancing, clapping audience.

I founded Kairos (KIGH-rowce) Dance Theatre in 1999. Kairos is an ancient Greek word meaning 'the open moment.' Kairos performers span four generations, ranging in age from four to one hundred years old. The company is the only intergenerational modern dance company in Minnesota and one of only a handful in the U.S. Our aim is to encourage audiences to re-examine their expectations about what is beautiful and worthwhile on the performance stage, about just exactly where the stage is and who is on it, and about the scientific as well as aesthetic and emotional necessity of what happens there. In the process, we are knitting together communities with the intent to change how we are together in the world.

Several years ago Kairos began a series of performances with legendary jazz saxophonist, Irv Williams. Irv, almost 91, is a treasure among Twin Cities jazz lovers. His tenor saxophone has been heard here since he arrived during

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WWII, his lush sound and lyrical, romantic phrasing earning him the nickname 'Mr. Smooth.' His eighth CD, *Finality*, was released last year. He is presently working on his ninth.

I told Irv that I wanted to develop an evening-length concert inspired by the artists who were creating in Harlem when Ida was there as a young woman, like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. "Yeah," said Irv, "and there were other artists that you probably never heard of like the Chocolate Dandies with Coleman Hawkins, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers. They were great musicians too. Let's play their music, too."

Centered in Harlem, New York City between 1920-1930, there was an outburst of creative activity in many art forms, originally named 'The New Negro Movement' and later known as the Harlem Renaissance. More than a social revolt against racism, it was a celebration by a black 'who's who' of musicians, composers, poets, dramatists, visual artists, and intellectuals of all things African-American that first attracted prosperous black middle class audiences.

My story connects back to Harlem, too. I am named after W.E.B. Du Bois, the scholar, writer, publisher, public intellectual and activist, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). My late mother, Noma Genné, worked as a field secretary for the NAACP national office in New York in the 1940s under Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins, traveling the country north of the Mason-Dixon line doing 'inter-cultural education.' Noma was a friend of Dr. Du Bois' soon-to-be wife, Shirley Graham. My mom thought the best place to dance was the Cotton Club and talked about people dancing in the streets at night in Harlem in the dark because of wartime restrictions.

The performance we recently realised through this unique collaboration with Ida and Irv employs a community-based approach of radical inclusion and celebration of the diversity of each person's gifts, which has informed my entire career as creative dance educator, choreographer and dancer. Inspired by their experiences and the lives of the artists with whom they worked has taught me to continue to respect their unique artistry and, at the same time, push my artistic output into new territory. Kairos embodies these ideas by recognising that people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds have their own dances to share and stories to tell that are beautiful and make compelling art.

Since 2001, I have expanded my community-based work through the creation of an innovative programme to vitally engage older adults through the artistic expression of dance and storytelling. The Dancing Heart – Vital Elders Moving in Community™ is now a national award winning, evidence-based arts programme that demonstrates positive health outcomes for older adults in adult day programme and nursing homes. This programme won the Award for Excellence in programme Innovation given by the Archstone Foundation and the Gerontological Health Section of the American Public Health Association. Additionally, The Dancing Heart™ received the American Society on Aging's 2008 Mind Alert Award that addresses early stage cognitive impairment. This programme exemplifies inclusion and equity by engaging all people to explore how dance vitalises and brings communities together, resulting in measureable health benefits and cost of care savings.

My mother, who believed fiercely in the importance of social justice, instilled in me the values that The Dancing Heart™ embodies. She always said, "I have to make a difference." Inviting people to express their joy and grief through dance, music and story is my way of offering a path toward freedom – freedom of the spirit. I find that older people are re-awakened – through dance, music and story – to their lives, dreams and vitality. When they are vitally engaged they can share their legacy with their families and their community. When those creative outpourings are supported, nurtured and celebrated, we find that lives change. The former opera singer begins to sing again in the halls, at meals, and playing Name that Tune with another resident. Or an elder gentleman invites the cook, the music therapist, his daughter, a volunteer and a resident in a chair to waltz with him. Another gentleman living with Parkinson's can lead the performance for the Founder's Dinner in a rousing rendition of Old Man River with clarity and power. It is not the same at the nursing home anymore. People are dancing, singing, sharing their stories, and doing what we aren't expecting them to do in a nursing home or adult day programme. They are reshaping the paradigm to 'I can make a difference.'

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Maria DuBois Genné (above right). Photo: Phil Bode

relationships, such as those between care professionals and patients, to ones of peers creating and discovering together. There is no right or wrong way to dance, just many different possibilities. Dance evokes the power of eros in its broadest kinship sense, promoting connections of many kinds between people. Whether we are making a chair version of the Virginia Reel, or dancing the two step with one partner holding on securely to the other more frail partner, or creating a 'dance of the sea' with silken cloths linking dancers across the dancing circle, we are building a community that no longer is limited by time and place, and is enriched by our imaginations and our presence.

Reginald Prim, an independent arts activist and critic who previously worked for the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis as its community liaison and now serves on our board of directors, wrote about his experience of watching one of our performances for the first time at a Minnesota Fringe Festival in 2005. He called his piece, *The Generous Heart of Dance: Kairos Makes a World*:

"There is something quite moving about watching seventeen people of varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds, ages and skill levels, creating enjoyable, entertaining and even profound dances together. It's as if you're watching a little working model of patience, care and respect. And, you find yourself, for an hour or so, rediscovering your faith in community and believing that art can heal, that dance is ritual and world-making, and that a

theatre can be a sacred space. I must assume there is a lesson here, a sermon if you will, about how to recover grace and beauty in our everyday lives; how to live artfully despite the limits of our skill and abilities; how to transmute the quotidian into the transcendent. Moreover, the dance here feels like a blessing – an active imparting of grace into the world, a transfusion of wonder directly to the heart." (1)

What Reggie so eloquently describes is what Kairos tries to live up to and what we think is possible in the nursing home, in the community center, and in the world. Our choreographed public performances, like our informal workshop performances in assisted-care facilities, are often 'gee-whiz' experiences for audiences. Many people throughout the United States are not accustomed to valuing or having rewarding artistic experiences from performers who are usually marginalised by a youth-oriented society. We are changing those stereotypes about our aging population and inviting everyone to dance together again.

contact maria@kairosdance.org / **visit** www.kairosdance.org
The documentary, *Dancing Heart™ – Power to Nurture and Heal* is at www.vimeo.com/9239437

(1) Reginald Prim, Published on the web, 22 July 2005, Minnesota Fringe Festival Blog.