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A Dancing Philosopher:

Zab Maboungou Celebrates Twenty Years at Work in Canada

BY BRIDGET CAUTHERY



Zab Maboungou in her work *Reverdanse*, 1995
Photo: Xavier Lluís

Zab Maboungou describes herself as a “child of colonialism”. The daughter of a Congolese mother and French father, she was born in Brazzaville, the capital of what is today Congo-Brazzaville, the former French colony of the Moyen (Middle) Congo straddling the equator in sub-Saharan West Africa. Born prior to Congo-Brazzaville’s independence from France, Maboungou came of age at a time when post-colonial unrest sparked an artistic and cultural renaissance that placed an emphasis on African identity. She believes that she was innately drawn to dance and by the age of thirteen understood that dance would be her vocation. “I knew that I had to be a dancer,” she explains. “I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t discuss it with anyone –

I did not see the need. It was a deeply personal, purely intimate decision. And one that was not at all incongruous with the life I knew.”

Despite secession and a strong independence movement – with which Maboungou’s father was involved – Congo-Brazzaville still felt France’s matriarchal pull and, being a bright student, Maboungou was encouraged to study in the “mother” country. In 1969, she went to Paris to study philosophy. There she met other children of African colonization and together they began sharing their knowledge of traditional African music and dance. Social gatherings formalized into dance clubs hosted by African student associations that sponsored the students’ endeavours to reconnect

with their appropriated heritage.

When questioned about what *kind* of African dance she performs – usually by Europeans keen to fix her to a certain place and time – Maboungou complies, describing herself as a practitioner of Congolese dance. But this, she explains, is a fabrication. The indigenous peoples living in what is today’s Congo-Brazzaville did not always live there – it is not their traditional homeland. By virtue of forced settlement or displacement by European colonization, the people living within the borders imposed by the Congo Act that gave France control of the region, became “Congolese”. Thus, to speak of Congolese dance is meaningless; there are dances performed by the Kongo people but these

“... movement and thought reside in the body. We move, we think; they are one and the same.”



Zab Maboungou
Photo: Cindy Rhéault

dances are not performed strictly within the geographical territory defined as the Congo. So African dance, encompassing a range of regional traditional dances within a global diaspora, shared between generations within the Congo but also recreated in the colonial mother countries and in other former colonies, conveys a richness of solidarity within Africa's fractured identity. In Paris and later in Canada, Maboungou studied traditional music and dance of the region but also undertook studies in the traditional dances of Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. She also danced with several Paris-based companies.

In 1973, Maboungou emigrated from Paris to Montreal, Quebec, shortly

after the province's Quiet Revolution. The Quiet Revolution was a period marked by a resurgence of pride in Quebec's French cultural heritage, a lessening of the influence of the Catholic Church in state affairs and a movement towards asserting Quebec's place as a modern and distinct society. Issues such as sovereignty and Quebec independence from the rest of English-speaking Canada were current. Cultivating a separate and unique Québécois identity was also expressed in terms of support for the arts. Aligning themselves with a "European model" of strong recognition for the value of artistic practice, the province was generous in its support; a thriving dance scene, centred on ballet and modern dance, was fostered.

In Europe, Maboungou had danced for other companies; in Canada, she determined to establish herself as an autonomous dancer and choreographer. The African-derived work that was being performed in Montreal at the time was not, to Maboungou's mind, what she herself believed dance to be. The dance she knew from her childhood was connected to breath, to the cycles of life and death. Few paid attention to her early attempts, but she remained steadfast in her dedication to the pursuit of a dance that was much more than costumes and music. Teaching became a natural response as she explored and refined movement with her students. In 1986 Maboungou founded Le cercle d'expression artistique Nyata Nyata, her company,

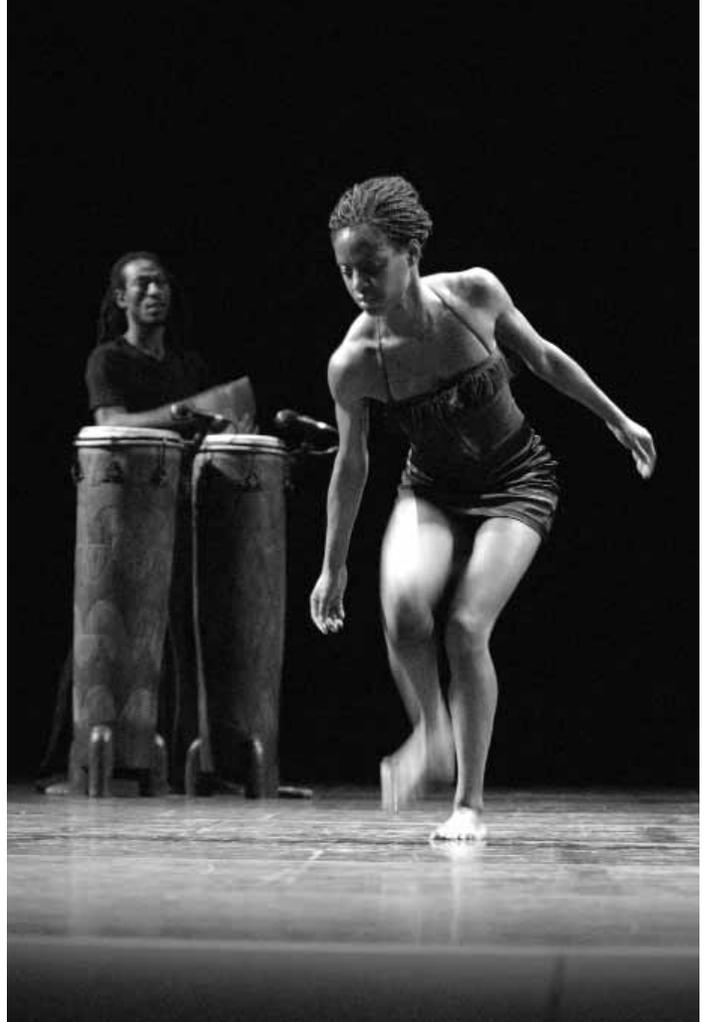
school and studios in Montreal, for the creation, presentation and promotion of her work within a local, national and international context.

Despite liberal support for the arts in Quebec, Maboungou's career stalled. Though increasing numbers of French-speaking Africans had been immigrating to Quebec since the demise of colonial rule in the decades following World War II, Maboungou was something of an oddity. Two years prior to her immigration, the federal government of Canada had drafted its official policy of multiculturalism. Cultural groups performing traditional African dance as part of cultural arts festivals and nationalist celebrations, such as Canada Day, were common and were encouraged under the new policies. The then prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, addressing the House of Commons in response to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism on October 8, 1971, stated: "A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians. Such a policy should help break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions". But a woman of African descent purporting to create *modern* African dance was incomprehensible to the government funding bodies of the 1970s and 1980s. The province's ballet and contemporary dance companies were often favoured over the independents, and Maboungou was excluded from receiving public arts support.

In 1988/89 when the Canada Council for the Arts undertook consultations on cultural diversity and established the Racial Equity Committee, the official policy of multiculturalism began to take hold. Joyce Zemans, a former director of the Canada Council and lecturer in arts policy and administration, stated in 1996 that Canadian multicultural policy is "admired internationally and considered a model by UNESCO, [though] critics blame the policy for devaluing what it purports to promote, fracturing Canadian society by its insistence on hyphenated Canadians and the creation of 'identity communities.'"



Dominic Donkor and Zab Maboungou with dance students, Taegu University, Korea



Pierre-Paul Makumbé and Karla Etienne in Zab Maboungou's *Lwaza*, 2005
Photo: Jérôme Dubé

Outspoken to the point of being considered radical, Maboungou continued to create and advocate for her work. She self-produced, steadfastly cultivating her own community through performances and workshops within Canada and abroad. In 1991, she was invited as a consultant, along with Maria O'Dole, a Ukrainian dance specialist from Alberta, to participate in the Canada Council's Dance Advisory Committee review of a report entitled *Inventory of Dance: Other Forms*. As representatives of the "other", Maboungou and O'Dole's contributions are described by dance historian Kate Cornell as "pivotal" since "they embodied the voices of the unheard dancers". Montreal critic Philip Szporer perceives that Maboungou's convictions have led her to "voice provocative ideas when it comes to writing, speaking and thinking about African dance and identity politics." At public meetings and gatherings he has witnessed her capacity to articulate things squarely and bluntly, voicing her concerns about representation, demanding to be heard. Her zeal, Szporer suggests, stirs up what columnist Christopher Hitchens calls "identity excitement" and Szporer senses that "she can claim victory in the arena of empowerment, as today there are several choreographers in Canada who are celebrating their blackness on stage. In no small measure, due to the pioneering spirit and persistent will that Zab possesses."

Maboungou's perseverance and advocacy for the rights

of “other dancers” in the 1980s and 1990s was eventually rewarded. She has the distinction of being the first African-Canadian choreographer to receive funding from the Canada Council and the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec. Today, on the Foreign Affairs Canada website, whose mandate is to “support Canadians abroad, work towards a more peaceful and secure world, and promote [Canadian] culture and values internationally,” Maboungou is a highlighted artist on the “African-Canadian Sights and Sounds” page. There, she is described as “one of the many talented African artists who have come to Canada in search of a new life and made outstanding contributions to Canadian culture”.

Maboungou sees that her earlier works sought to build a landscape from which to draw out specific ideas and were the results of her search to find the “dance that she was meant to dance.” Working from simple gestures because of their capacity to be intertextual, she gradually honed her capacity to intuit and play with rhythm. She will sing a rhythm incessantly inside her head until the movement, the gestures, emerge. This engagement with rhythm is expressed both in her vivid embodiment of the rhythms and in the vital relationships she cultivates with gifted musicians, intimating a strong sense of communion.

Reverdanse was Maboungou’s first full-length solo work. Created in 1991, it toured across North America, Europe and Africa, bringing Maboungou worldwide recognition and acclaim. Her capacity to abstract and deconstruct traditional rhythms and movements to create a sense of timelessness (now her signature choreographic method) is clearly visible in this early work. Trips home to the Congo and to other neighbouring African countries fuelled her ongoing explorations to better understand the derivation and the implicit meanings of traditional rhythms and movements. Maboungou describes her solo *Incantation* (1995) as a piece about energy. The music, initially created by the clapping of her hands, the slapping of her feet on the floor and the tinkling of the cowry shells around her waist, emanates from her small frame. She revels in the roundness of the rhythms, allowing them to build and fade, ebb and flow. *Mozongi* or *Les Revenants* (“undead”), a group work for four or five dancers choreographed in 1997, is intensely



Zab Maboungou in the studio



Zab Maboungou in her work *Incantation*, 1997
Photo: Xavier Lluís

physical, the dancers working to transcend their weight and to fill the space. *Nsamu* (2003), meaning the “subject of debate” in the Kikongo language, and its companion work *Lwáza* (2005), in which Maboungou questions how one goes from being the agitated to the agitator, are masterworks of focussed rhythm and counterpoint. Minimal in design and execution, both works are fierce and unrelenting in their pursuit of rhythmic clarity.

Maboungou’s fascination with rhythm is correlated with her interest in the “physicality of time as a vehicle for understanding and interrelating with space.” In writing about Maboungou’s performance of *Reverdanse* in 1993, author and journalist Michael Crabb commented that the choreography is “less concerned with form ... than with conveying a sense of the body as a vessel of deep-seated memories, ritual secrets and visceral intelligence”. This sentiment was echoed the next year by fellow critic Elissa Barnard who described the same work as “the organic union of movement to rhythm”. Of *Incantation*, Maboungou’s choreographic response to a walk in the country, Montreal-based writer and critic Philip Szporer states, “she is a small window on infinity.” When she performed *Incantation* in New York in 1999, *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff



Zab Maboungou in her work *Nsamu*, 2004
Photo: Xavier Lluís

described her performance as “mesmerizing”. Vivine Scarlett, artistic director of *danceImmersion* in Toronto, met Maboungou through Canadian Artist Network: Black Artists In Action (CAN:BAIA). She describes how Maboungou’s “petite physique” puts forward “a powerful presence” that emanates from this “intelligent, deep feeling, and deep thinking artist.”

Maboungou came to dance academia’s attention following a performance of *Reverdanse* as part of an Off-FIND (Festival internationale de nouvelle danse) program in her Nyata Nyata studio. The performance inspired American dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright’s incisive analysis of identity in her “Dancing the Minefield” chapter of her 1999 book *Choreographing Difference*. Cooper Albright recalls walking up St. Laurent Street in 1992 searching for Maboungou’s studio; upon arriving, she observed that the showing was not part of either the “cool” or “hot” Montreal avant-garde scenes. She vividly remembers seeing Maboungou move and sing with a richness of integrity and an open-heartedness that was very moving. She explains that she “knew right away that something really important was going on” and that she would attempt to write about it at a later date.

“I cherish the capacity to think on my own, and not to control; to approach dance as a way of understanding life. And is there really anything better than dancing one’s life away?”



Flyer for Zab Maboungou’s *Mozongi*, Place des Arts, Montreal, January 2001

When Maboungou spoke with her audience after the excerpt, to Cooper Albright she seemed “genuinely interested in engaging in real dialogue, not just silly stuff.” Of particular significance to Cooper Albright is how Maboungou “can move from dancing into more abstract thinking and back into dancing.” She adds that “so often in our culture these two pursuits get separated in a general mind/body divide.” To this end, Cooper Albright says that “unlike so many dancer/choreographers who regard the critic/dance writer warily ... Zab is a total partner in discussing her work, especially in the

context of other contemporary works coming out of both the Americas and Africa.”

Dena Davida, a doctor of anthropology and the artistic director of Montreal’s dance space Tangente, feels that Maboungou may well be “Canada’s first and only African dance postmodernist.” Davida observes that Maboungou’s artistic temperament displays “a heady fusion of motion and emotion”. Watching her choreographic evolution over the last decade, Davida has witnessed the “ever-more minute fragmentation of her movement aesthetic.” She sees that Maboungou has “coolly been, literally, deconstructing African rhythms until the only most abstract movement remains,” and that she is “single-minded, even hot-headed, in her mission to dissect and reassemble the parts again”.

In addition to her artistic output, Maboungou has been engaged as a professor of philosophy at Montmorency College in Laval, an occupation that both complements and extends her deconstructive and analytic approach to movement. André Rocque, a fellow professor of philosophy, has been working alongside Maboungou since 1982. Reflecting on their twenty-five-year association as both friends and colleagues, Rocque perceives that earlier phases of Maboungou’s development as an artist were processes of getting organized, setting goals, and of discerning a direction, a map of where she wanted and needed to go. He believes that Maboungou’s investment in her teaching heralded a period of incredible growth for her – both as a choreographer and as a performer – with the creation of full-length choreographies, regular performances in various Montreal spaces, and trips abroad to prestigious venues in the United States and overseas. As a next step, Maboungou fleshed out her body of work, her creative process, her distinct reper-



Zab Maboungou in her work *Décompte*, 2007
Photo: Cindy Rhéault



Rehearsal of Zab Maboungou’s *Mozongi*, 2000
Photo: Marc Verret

toire and her style of dancing. More recently, Rocque believes that Maboungou has entered a new era characterized by a burgeoning maturity and a desire to take stock. This is evident in her most recent work *Décompte*, which translates as “stock-taking” or “tally”, created to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of her company and presented in October 2007. Rocque also points to the culmination of Maboungou’s philosophical approach to movement in the publishing of *Heya... Danse!*, an essay on dance in life. While he sees the book as a significant contribution to the field, he maintains that one must still look to Maboungou’s dancing for “her deepest thoughts and feelings.”

Zelma Badu-Youngue, a fellow dancer and choreographer of African dance and professor at Ohio State University, has known Maboungou since 1994 when they were both presented by DanceWorks in Toronto. Badu-Youngue sees one of Maboungou’s strengths as her ability to take traditional movement and present it in a more contemporary way. Maboungou’s work, which she describes as fundamentally philosophical and spiritual, is, despite its postmodern qualities, in fact traditionally African. Badu-Youngue suggests that these qualities are conveyed not only in her choreography but in her teaching where she seeks to convey the



Zab Maboungou

subtleties, the nuances and the origins of the movement so that her students absorb an holistic understanding – one that is simultaneously physical, emotional and intellectual. This approach, Badu-Younger perceives, is unusual in North America. Szporer concurs that her contribution to the dance community through her teaching, where students “find a spiritual release in the rhythms and movements she employs at her Nyata Nyata school” is very important. As Maboungou herself explains “movement and thought reside in the body. We move, we think; they are one and the same.”

Maboungou’s impressive and far-reaching career, equally at home in the studio, in the spotlight and in her chosen role as a thorn in the side of the dance establishment, is clearly built on her conviction to dance her own dance. Two decades spent forging a clear and distinct path have diminished neither her spirit nor her appetite to continue this self-appointed search. Sitting in her studio, she is serene: “I cherish the capacity to think on my own,” she says, “and not to control; to approach dance as a way of understanding life. And is there really anything better than dancing one’s life away?”

Bridget Cauthery is a writer, teacher, choreographer and arts consultant based in Toronto. She holds a Masters degree in Dance from York University where she was nominated for a university thesis award, and was recently awarded her doctorate from the University of Surrey, United Kingdom. She is currently Company Manager for Toronto Dance Theatre, a post she has held since 2000.

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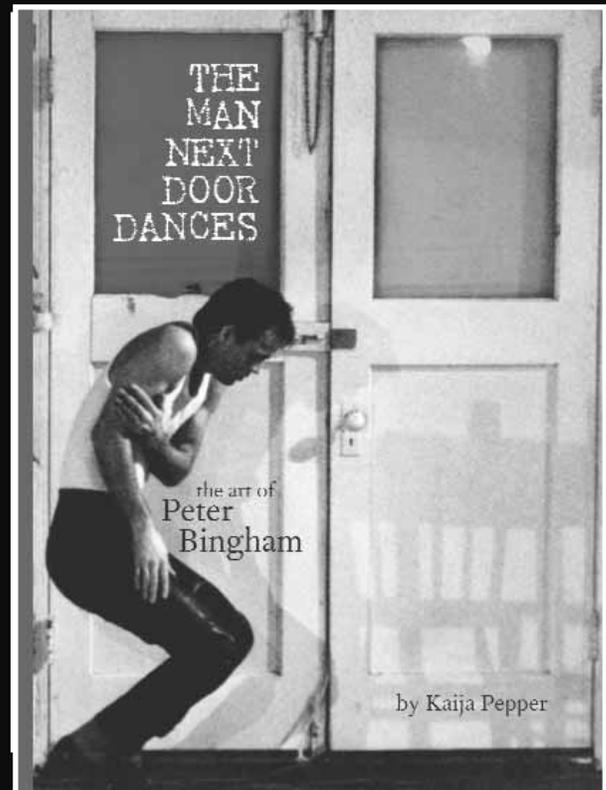
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