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## Profile 7: Dancing on the Through-Line: Rennie Harris and the Past and Future of Hip-Hop Dance

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RENNIE HARRIS AND THE PAST AND FUTURE OF HIP-HOP DANCE

by Jeff Chang

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

DANCING ON THE THROUGH-LINE:  
RENNIE HARRIS AND THE PAST AND FUTURE OF HIP-HOP DANCE

by Jeff Chang

EVERYWHERE THERE IS EVIDENCE  
THAT WE LIVE NOW IN A HIP-HOP  
WORLD.

On the streets, you hear it first, playing through iPods or cellphones, three-minute blasts that mix up global cultures with avant-garde technique. Fine artists design shoes and show their work in thirty-second bumpers on MTV. The buildings of Zaha Hadid explode and arrow back on themselves like graffiti, while Sao Paulo's outlaws tag their pichação as if they were architects. Dichotomies dissolve, categories crumble, the high and the low merge. As Tupac Shakur once put it, roses grow from cracks in the concrete. In this new hip-hop world, art appears everywhere.

But in the world of concert dance, the separation between the bustling street and the dark performance hall, the distance between the new world and the old, seems to linger.

What is referred to as “social dance”—that is, whether ethnic, folk, or working-class, most dance that isn't concert dance—seems more popular than ever. Each week, television shows like *Dancing With The Stars* bring movement to the masses, arenas fill with audiences thrilled by African American tapdance or Irish stepdancing, and movies like *Mad Hot Ballroom* and *Take The Lead* celebrate a renewed interest in dance education in the schools. Yet concert dance remains an elite artform enjoyed primarily by audiences educated in its language.

For most of his life, 42-year-old hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris has identified himself as one who dances for a living. For the last fifteen years, he has also extended himself deeply into the aesthetics of concert dance and pushed its boundaries. He is no Juilliard product. He learned from other so-called “street” dancers.

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The dances he does are the popular, perhaps the *most* popular, kind—hip-hop.

Working at this juncture of elite and popular, avant and folk, past and future, high and low, Harris has managed to bring worlds together. Young hip-hop performance artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph calls Harris a “cross-roads figure,” explaining, “he is able to stay true to the form and excite folks on both sides of the line without compromising his role in either world.”

At a very young age, Harris became what a dance critic might call a *virtuoso* of social dance. In the language of his peers, he was a “stepper,” and when the styles changed, he was a “pop-locker,” “freestyler,” and finally,

dancers when the DJ sets off the breaks. For Harris, it has always been the most important place to be.

Born the oldest of six children in 1964, seven months before race riots left his North Philadelphia neighborhood a politically abandoned ghetto, Lorenzo Harris was a tall, slim, and somehow elegant kid. Peers would have said he had style. At the age of fourteen, he saw the movie version of *West Side Story*, the Shakespeare-goes-urban classic of dancing gangbangers and gangsta dancers. The gang story made sense to him, even though where he lived, the gangsters rarely danced. His cousins were in gangs, and two of his younger brothers were being recruited. But with his innate flair and physical grace, it also made sense

## “IT IS RENNIE’S GENIUS TO HAVE MADE US RADICALLY RE-THINK WHAT WE UNDERSTAND THE POSSIBILITIES OF DANCE TO BE.”

a “hip-hop dancer.” Suddenly, in the early 1990s, Harris found himself in the rarefied world of contemporary dance. In February 2007, Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center will be turned over to Harris so that he can present a three-day mid-career retrospective. He will lead his company, Puremovement, through his most acclaimed concert dance work, including *Endangered Species*, *Rome and Jewels*, and *Facing Mekka*.

Within hip-hop, he is a key figure in preserving the vernacular form: bringing together the pioneers of hip-hop dance, collecting their stories and movements, and exposing them to new generations of hip-hop fans. For Joseph and an emerging cohort of progressive artists, Harris is an artistic giant who, through his solo work and his company, has broken down the walls of institutions formerly closed to hip-hop dance and theatre. To influential contemporary dance critics such as Suzanne Carbonneau, Harris is a visionary.

“Rennie Harris is one of the most important choreographers working today in any genre,” Carbonneau says. “It is Rennie’s genius to have made us radically re-think what we understand the possibilities of dance to be.”

**BEFORE HIP-HOP, THE TERM CIPHER SIGNIFIED ZERO, THE UNKNOWNABLE, OR THE INSIGNIFICANT.** But in hip-hop, the cipher is the circle that closes excitedly around master

that he would become a dancer.

He was lucky to be young in a vibrant era of Black social dance and localized urban culture. Regional dance styles proliferated, including “b-boying” in New York City, “locking” in Southern California, and “popping,” “boogaloo,” and “strutting” upstate—all distinct forms later lumped incorrectly as “breakdancing.” The dances thrived on ruthless competition. If social dance was about the joy of participation, Black social dance was also where rivals engaged in stylistic combat and, as Zora Neale Hurston famously put it, “threaten to do atrocious murder one upon the other.” Ciphers were the all-important centers of the culture, where aesthetics made great leaps forward.

In North Philly, the dance was called “stepping,” or “Iking” (pronounced “Ike-ing”). Some called it “GQ.” Harris learned the dance from one of the original steppers’ younger brothers. Stepping groups had names like the Mighty Boomshakers, the Flamingos, the Franchise, the Stepping Masters, Disco Kings and Queens, and the Great Gatsbys. They were throwbacks to the days of tap-dance social clubs. “If it was a Saturday, and there was nothing going on and you walked around in a goddamned suit,” Harris recalls, “the community of the street knew you were a stepper.”

The young Harris topped off his suit with a derby. He wore monogrammed designer socks and spats, and carried a cane. His pants had nickels sewn into the pocket that shook when he moved. At a party, he and his fellow

steppers leaned against the wall, feet split at right angles, one hand on their waists, the other on their canes, staring down their rivals. Then the DJ would put on a song like Kool and the Gang's "Love The Life You Live" or the Blackbyrds' "Rock Creek Park" and the crowd would clear the floor for the steppers.

One hand behind their back, the other tapping the cane, they would move in and out, stomping their feet down on the one and four, syncopating around the three. As they came to the center of the floor, they accented their footfalls with crisp turns and slides inherited from tap and the Temptations. There, one by one, they went

**"IF IT WAS A SATURDAY, AND THERE WAS NOTHING GOING ON AND YOU WALKED AROUND IN A GODDAMNED SUIT," HARRIS RECALLS, "THE COMMUNITY OF THE STREET KNEW YOU WERE A STEPPER."**

off, light on their feet like the Nicholas Brothers, quickening and complicating the rhythms.

Harris might end his performance by sidling up to his rivals and kicking his foot up as if to toss dirt on them. He'd slide back and smoothly pull up his pant leg to reveal his spat and sock. Then he'd dust his shoe and shoulder in two swift motions, and fall back into his position with his cane, looking mean and impressive. Virtuosity was nothing without the conqueror's adrenaline rush.

It didn't take long for an official from the Smithsonian Folklife Center to notice him and make him an offer he couldn't refuse: They would pay him to go to high schools and perform his stepping. Harris could extend his sphere of style across town, and above all, pocket a paycheck. The Smithsonian officials would help preserve another ephemeral urban folkdance.

By 1979, stepping's time was passing. Harris began noticing that some of the Puerto Rican steppers were spinning on their heads, presenting new kinds of footwork that people said came from the Bronx. And on Saturday afternoons, the nationally televised *Soul Train* featured the irrepressible Boogaloo Sam and the Electric Boogaloos, from Fresno, with their unique and riveting synthesis of California funk styles.

The EB's boogalooed onstage with exaggerated, sweeping walkouts that seemed to recall the famous

"Snake Hips" dance of the 1920s. They glided as if on clouds. They mimed monsters, scarecrows, or mummies. Other times they tick-tocked like their arms and shoulders had been strobe-lit or surges of electricity had overtaken their bodies. These were the days when sci-fi blockbusters and quarter videogame arcades were the rage, when Black funk was being transformed by German, Anglo, and Japanese electro sounds. Stepping represented the past, and the EB's looked like the future. After Harris met some dancers from California, he stopped stepping and started popping and boogalooing.

There was a local TV show called *Dancin' On Air*, a version of that old Philly export *American Bandstand*, meant to appeal to the post-white-flight city. Harris and his new crew, the Scanner Boys, challenged the Philly Floor Takers, a legendary stepping crew, to a televised battle. The Floor Takers sent out a popper to try to at least neutralize the Boys' novelty. But in the end, when the audience called in their votes, the

Scanner Boys had won.

Harris wouldn't realize the moment's significance until years later. He had gone from being a fourteen-year-old emissary of the fading local dance to helping displace it with a style from California. He had hastened the end of stepping's reign and become a seventeen-year-old herald of a new global hip-hop era.

**THE SAME PROCESS OF STYLISTIC DISPLACEMENT REPEATED ITSELF IN OTHER CITIES, THEN AROUND THE WORLD,** accelerated by a spate of hip-hopsploitation movies in the mid-1980s, including *Breakin'*, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, and *Beat Street*. These films combined the California and New York dances into a broad, artificial (and now universally disparaged) category called "breakdancing."

For a time, hundreds of young hip-hop dancers found fast success. Harris moved to New York City and broke into the ranks of the b-boy elite, under the alias "Prince Scarecrow." Harris was offered a spot in an influential crew called the Magnificent Force and toured the world with top rap acts like Run DMC and Kurtis Blow. But the "breakdancing" idea was the product of a fad-oriented youth culture industry that pumped out thou-

sands of how-to books, wristbands and linoleum mats, and dozens of novelty hits. Almost overnight, the body rock went the way of the pet rock. The dancers returned home to neighborhoods wrecked by trickle-down urban Reaganomics and drugs.

The story might have ended there. And for many hip-hop dancers, it did, sometimes as real tragedies. But two decades later, hip-hop dance is as vital as ever, and Harris stays at the head of its three leading edges.

Hip-hop remains a rapidly evolving vernacular dance, with stylistic change driven by inner-city teenagers of color. The story of hip-hop boils down to five-year cycles of teens imprinting their style on a neighborhood—that neighborhood then quickly becoming as large as the world. Inevitably, their dances disperse and infect the mainstream, a process accelerated now by blogs and internet sites like YouTube. This Black social dance is in another golden age, as regional styles flourish: “krumping” and “clowning” in Los Angeles, “juke” or “footwork” in Chicago, “hyphy” or “turf dance” in the San Francisco Bay Area, “jit” in Detroit, and even something called “Chicken Noodle Soup” in New York City.

pagnie Kafig—are increasingly showcased at top venues and festivals around the world. While these artists expand concert dance’s vocabulary and content, they are also being counted on to attract new, younger, more racially diverse audiences to the concert halls.

Working within and between these three ciphers of hip-hop dance—the social dancers, the purists, and the aesthetes—is where Rennie Harris has found himself.

## IT WAS ACTUALLY THE FOLKLORISTS FROM THE SMITHSONIAN,

the ones who employed him as a teen, who got Harris to think about dancing. “Now I had to stand up in front of kids and older people and say this is what I do,” he says. “One of the things I realized is that the very first time in the Middle Passage that slaves were made to dance in shackles to rhythms of tea kettles is the birth of Black contemporary art.”

But then, to hear him tell it, the reason he began doing Black contemporary dance was a lot simpler. “Somebody gave me some money,” he says with a hint of a smile.

## HARRIS AND HIS NEW CREW, THE SCANNER BOYS, CHALLENGED THE PHILLY FLOOR TAKERS, A LEGENDARY STEPPING CREW, TO A TELEVISED BATTLE... BUT IN THE END, WHEN THE AUDIENCE CALLED IN THEIR VOTES, THE SCANNER BOYS HAD WON.

At the same time, the regional dances of the 1970s that were popularized globally during the 1980s now form a canon of hip-hop dance, and a massive infrastructure has built up around these movements. Global b-boy and b-girl competitions occur in Miami, Germany, Japan, and the UK, while networks of dance schools and teaching seminars headed by legendary dancers flourish. Hip-hop dance, in other words, still has its ciphers of innovation, and has also developed its own establishment.

Hip-hop dance has blossomed, too, within contemporary dance, theatre, and performance art. A growing cohort of solo performers and progressive theatre and dance companies—including New York City’s Full Circle Productions, Canada’s Rubberbandance Group, the UK’s Jonzi D, Benji Reid, and ZooNation, South Korea’s Project Soul, Germany’s Storm, and France’s Com-

During the late 1980s, Harris had returned to Philadelphia and taken a job at Tower Records on South Street as an undercover security guard, mostly nabbing white kids trying to steal N.W.A. rap albums. Ever vigilant for an opportunity to dance, he soon secured a job on the USA Network show called *Dance Party USA*. Harris was immensely likable. As a featured dancer, floor director, and choreographer, he filled the screen with high-energy, exaggerated motions; sometimes he even parodied blaxploitation pimps in comic skits. His skill and magnetism won him his own show, *One House Street*.

Still, Harris kept his Tower Records job. He knew how show biz could be. But when people began recognizing him on South Street, his cover was blown, and Tower let him go. And then in 1991, both *One House Street* and *Dance Party USA* were cancelled.

Times got tougher. Amidst war and recession and rioting, mainstream pop music moved from the glamour of house to the pessimism of grunge. Hip-hop had now become the voice of urban unrest, and “gangsta rap” all but ended a decade of hip-hop dancing. With a child to feed and rent to pay, Harris resorted to a series of short-term hustles to keep things going, not all of them legal. He was plunging into despair.

That’s when Michael Pedretti, the founder and director of Philly’s Movement Theater International, came calling. Pedretti asked Harris to “commission a work” for the organization’s New Voices New Views festival. Despite having danced professionally for over ten years, Harris had no idea what Pedretti was asking him to do.

“I was like, ‘What do you mean by *work*?’” Harris

with you and the stage opened up and you still dancin’, to every fucking thing, it just wasn’t a big thing to me when I went into it. Okay, I knew exactly what to do.”

Working one feverish night, he put together a piece he entitled *Endangered Species*. Filled with knowing references to funk godfather George Clinton, the rapper Ice Cube, and Black Power poet Haki Madhubuti, the piece was set at the age when the teenage Harris began learning hip-hop dance. *Endangered Species* articulated that teen’s horrifying backstory and his dead-end present: being chased by rival thugs, dealing with the effects of molestation and depression, chasing another teen with his brothers through the streets, gun in hand, firing at the boy, imagining and embodying what it would feel like to be shot.

## THERE WAS ANOTHER ISSUE. THE FESTIVAL WAS A YEAR AWAY. HARRIS SAYS HE ASKED PEDRETTI, “ARE YOU AWARE I COULD BE DEAD IN A YEAR?”

recalls, ‘You want me to create a *routine*?’ Because that was my vocabulary at that time. And [Pedretti] said, ‘Why don’t you do forty-five minutes?’ I remember my heart dropped. I had never danced past ten.”

There was another issue. The festival was a year away. Harris says he asked Pedretti, “Are you aware I could be dead in a year?”

So began Harris’s journey into the insular world of contemporary dance.

## THE HYPERACTIVE NORTH PHILLY WHIPPET HAD AGED INTO THE BODY OF A MAN.

He had grown out dreads, and put on weight and muscle. He now cut an imposing figure, subject to the dissonances and humiliations of everyday racial profiling. Harris felt he had a lot to say, and all the things he wanted to say he could say through hip-hop movement.

“I wasn’t held by the limits of hip-hop or the pride of ‘I got to kick it!’” he says. “Had I got that call when I was twenty-two? It’d been a travesty. But because I had been through what I had went through already, in regards to every possible way to do hip-hop—perform it on the street to on the gravel to on top of rooftops to stages that were a-shakin’ while you were moving and slidin’

The pulse of the piece was set by Harris’s own tortured, asthmatic breathing—an established hip-hop rhythmic device. The German musical group Kraftwerk and the pioneering New York rappers had converted breathing and mouth-noisemaking into percussive performances. But here Harris’s meter was irregular, deliberately asymmetrical. Instead of intimacy or propulsion, the effect was claustrophobic.

In the piece, Harris is being chased. He runs in place in long slow boogaloo-like steps, turning in each of four directions. Then he stops and bends and contracts his arm and torso in popping motions, before running again. Over the harsh breathing, Harris’s voice begins to narrate in an affectless tone, as if he is speaking to a social worker or another distant outsider. The voice explains that two of his brothers are gangsters, one is disabled, and the other is a buppie, and how they all reacted violently to their sister’s coming out as a lesbian.

Harris turns to face the audience. Suddenly, the relationship between the dancer and the audience is revealed and reversed: the audience is made uncomfortably aware of its voyeurism. He begins popping again—the mechanistic strobing, the angular leans, the freezes, the monster and scarecrow poses, the obsessive hand tics. The familiar movements have been turned now to signify an inner turmoil, and a sense of being utterly trapped.



The piece was painfully personal—after his mother came to a performance, he says he was too embarrassed to see her in the lobby afterwards. But Harris knew he had crossed an artistic threshold. “This is the piece that, in everything that I do, I use as my template,” he says. “Because it’s the one piece that marries hip-hop and theatre. And it marries hip-hop and theatre in a very simplistic

black people is? That diagonal right there,” Harris says. “In Western construct, they want to glorify the structure, the line. And we like to look at *our* line as a guideline, not a god-line.”

Instead of auditioning contemporary dance students, he went to the clubs and scoped out the ciphers. Once he had some folks with him—like former Scanner Boy

## HE BEGINS POPPING AGAIN—THE MECHANISTIC STROBING, THE ANGULAR LEANS, THE FREEZES, THE MONSTER AND SCARECROW POSES, THE OBSESSIVE HAND TICS. THE FAMILIAR MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN TURNED NOW TO SIGNIFY AN INNER TURMOIL, AND A SENSE OF BEING UTTERLY TRAPPED.

way.” He calls that hybrid quality the “Endangered Species Factor.”

*Endangered Species* shocked Pedretti’s festival audience, then the modern dance world. “When I saw it,” says Laura Faure, director of the Bates Dance Festival, articulating a common reaction, “I wept.”

**HARRIS MAY NOT YET HAVE KNOWN THE FORMAL LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE,** nor was he inclined to think of a future in it. “I work with things as they happen,” he wrote years later. “As children we never knew what each day would bring, there wasn’t any planning for anything, when it happened you took advantage of it and that’s how I dance and how I create work.”

At the same time, modern dance was paying, and hip-hop—at least in the old, familiar ways—wasn’t. More importantly, he knew exactly what kind of artistic statement he wanted to make, and with whom.

“Modern dance—contemporary dancers—are good. They give you great lines that I envision in my head, and I do like that,” he says. “But if they were hip-hop dancers doing the same thing, it would be rough, ‘cause they couldn’t do it. They’d be humped back—and that’s what I *really* like.”

“It’s like that original aesthetic of jazz, that crooked line. That fucking off-beat, that twist, that’s what’s the hep cats did. That lean. That walk. When you’re talking about African-American history in this country, we’re talking about that crooked line. You wanna see who

Brandon “Brother Peace” Albright, and James “Cricket” Colter, who had danced for Boyz II Men, Rosie Perez and Will Smith—he set up “house jam sessions” at local dance studios to attract younger talent.

Colter invited green-eyed, dreadlocked Ron “Zen One” Wood to the sessions. A former martial arts pro, Wood was easing away from fighting after sustaining one too many injuries. When asked why he took up dance, he admits, “I hate to say this, but it was because of the girls.” The jam sessions were intensely competitive, but he says, “Rennie was auditioning me, in a way.”

The sessions offered Rennie the same heat and light as the stepping or popping ciphers; they were a true test of a dancer’s skill and discipline. In this way, Harris assembled his core company over the course of the next four years.

Some of the pieces he put together for the commission, like *Puremovement*, the piece that would give the company its name, were extended cipher-style routines, meant simply to convey the joy of solo and ensemble movement just the way that Rennie’s favorite crews had. Other pieces would be something more.

Word spread quickly in the modern dance scene that Harris was the freshest performer to come along in years. Cutting-edge venues like the Painted Bride and the Jacob’s Pillow Festival featured him prominently. Ellis Finger, an award-winning presenter at Lafayette College’s Williams Center for the Arts, remembers seeing his videotape for the first time.

“It was very polished work, very exciting work,” Finger says. “I was excited by the energy and the sheer

excitement and athleticism of the dancing. What I wasn't prepared for was a streak of anger."

Harris opened his Williams Center show with a piece called *Dying Nigger*, based on the Last Poets' poem "Die Nigga!!!" and Harris's experience working with prisoners at Philadelphia's notoriously brutal Holmesburg Prison. Every time the Poets said the word "nigger"—it came up over seventy times—Harris instructed his dancers to fall down.

Finger recalls, "It was like, let's see if I still have an audience when this is over."

## HARRIS HAD FOUND A WHOLE NEW AUDIENCE FOR HIP-HOP THEATRE.

But almost reflexively, he began reaching out to his old friends. In some striking ways, his trajectory had paralleled what was happening with his peers in New York City.

That's where hip-hop theatre had begun in the mid-1980s with Harris's old crew, The Magnificent Force. While some b-boy crews focused on pop crossover, Steve "Mr. Wiggles" Clemente says, "We had costumes, we had masks, we had lighting. We were doing pieces on nuclear war."

In 1986, Clemente became one of the first b-boys to work in a Broadway show. Two years later, he presented the show *Rhythm Technicians* off-Broadway, with a company composed entirely of b-boys and b-girls. By 1991,

shows. We started to [ask] why not develop our own companies?" says Gabriel "Kwikstep" Dionisio, a former member of GhettoOriginal and now co-founder of hip-hop theatre group, Full Circle Productions.

At the same time Harris was pushing hip-hop into new territory, he wanted to reach back to honor its roots. His next idea would bring him back into close work with many of his old friends, harness their collective energies, and transform him into one of hip-hop's great preservationists. So in 1997, as GhettoOriginal was taking its second play *Jam On The Groove* on an international tour, Savion Glover's *Bring In Da Noise, Bring In Da Funk* was at the Joseph Papp Theater, and Puremovement was creating a formidable repertory, Harris decided to launch the Illadelph Legends Festival. Since then, the annual week-long festival has brought hip-hop dance pioneers to teach master-classes and give lectures to students and the interested public.

The festival placed creators like Don Campbell and Boogaloo Sam back into the limelight. Of all the hip-hop arts, dance remains the least documented and most obscured by the mists of history. Millions know how to lock or pop, indeed the dances continue to enjoy periodic revivals, a process accelerated by the rapidly expanded opportunities for dancers and choreographers in music video, film, and advertising. But precious few knew who the originators were. The Festival reconnected the pioneers to the new generations they had spawned.

Some of the most important work of the Festival

## SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WORK OF THE FESTIVAL TAKES PLACE BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. PIONEERS MAKE A CONCERTED EFFORT TO RE-ESTABLISH THE GUILD-LIKE MASTER-APPRENTICE RELATIONSHIPS THAT HAD EXISTED WHEN THE DANCES WERE STILL LOCAL.

Clemente's idea had blossomed into a dance company, GhettoOriginal, which staged a sold-out run at P.S. 122 of an evening-length musical entitled *So What Happens Now?* The question was literal. When the breakdancing craze ended, a generation of b-boys felt stranded. As with everything else in the culture, hip-hop theatre was born of necessity and creativity.

Some b-boys began working with ballet and modern dance companies. "They brought us in to liven up their

takes place behind closed doors. Pioneers make a concerted effort to re-establish the guild-like master-apprentice relationships that had existed when the dances were still local, codifying the moves and streamlining the ways the dances were taught. But these efforts have sometimes revived old disputes and rivalries when groups staked dueling claims to history. The Legends Festival provides an occasion for the pioneers to gather behind closed doors to hash out their disagreements.

As one who speaks passionately on the need to honor and provide for pioneers, and more importantly, as one of their own, Harris was perhaps one of the few persons who might have been able to bring the different factions together. “It’s economics. If you pay ‘em, they’ll come,” he modestly avers, before laughing heartily. “Like, ‘Alright Rennie, I’ll come down. But you know, I don’t get along with so-and-so.’ ‘Don’t worry about it. Just c’mon!’”

## MEANWHILE, HARRIS HAD LARGER AUDIENCES IN STORE.

One evening, while he and his company were in residence at Bates, Faure saw Harris working on a script on his laptop. “So what are you working on?” she asked.

“Ever since I was a kid, I’ve always wanted to do something with *Romeo and Juliet*,” he explained, telling her how much *West Side Story* had captivated him as a child. It was the classic urban story of beauty and violence. The next day, he and Faure began working on funding for what became his second masterpiece, *Rome and Jewels*.

With the gifted director Ozzie Jones as dramaturg and the superb Rodney Mason in the lead as Rome, the show premiered in 2000. The Montagues and Capulets became two street crews—the “Monster Q’s” were funk style dancers dressed in black, the “Caps” b-boys in red. The climax staged the rival crews at a house party in a thrilling, always completely improvised battle that would descend into violence. To highlight the play’s critique of masculinity, for example, “Jewels” never took physical form, appearing only as a shaft of light. And to emphasize the razor turns in daily street life, the scenes veer from levity to tragedy in an eye-blink.

But the key to the play was its rapid-fire code-switching. It wasn’t just in the frequent bursts of movement that, taken together, alluded to practically every hip-hop social dance style popular during the 1980s and 90s, but also in the surprising outpouring of language. Throughout the play, Jones, Mason, and the dancers flit between Shakespeare, prep-school English, and ebonics with a dexterity that comes from living polyculturally every single day.

One stunning monologue moved from Shakespeare’s sonnets to Bounty Killer’s *sufferah patois* to Mystikal’s booty-hop come-ons before pausing to clown the whole enterprise—“Isn’t that lovely usage of iambic pentame-

ter, honey?” The accelerated referentiality was the point; it reflected a complicated worldview. In a story with a happy ending, that worldview would serve as the foundation for the protagonists’ ultimate triumph. In *Rome and Jewels*, a realist tragedy, the failure was that these young men, already circumscribed by race and place, drawn together by a spinning web of signifiers, still could not connect.

## ROME AND JEWELS SECURED HARRIS’S DESTINY.

“He won a Bessie for it. His career took off like a shot,” Faure says. “It’s been quite a journey for him since then.”

Harris arrived at an odd time for dance and for artists of color generally. Modern dance was in flux. Giants like Alvin Ailey and Martha Graham had passed, and artists of color like Bill T. Jones were beginning to dance deeply into questions of identity.

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s had called for work for, by, and about “the people.” The multiculturalism movement of the 1980s insisted that people of color needed to be better represented in artistic content and in positions of power and decision-making in the art world. Under pressure, arts institutions opened their doors to more artists and sought to reach more diverse audiences. For its part, hip-hop had played a central role in commercial breakthroughs in music, film, and advertising.

But many establishment critics derided the rise of what they called “victim art,” a term parallel to “political correctness” that solidified the backlash against multiculturalism. Some artists of color, too, felt the movement sacrificed aesthetic standards, championed didacticism in artistic content, and sometimes swept away old stereotypes only to create new essentializing categories. Still others felt tokenized, prevailed upon by arts institutions to legitimize their authority and provide them with new audiences amidst demographic change, but still treated as B-list artists.

Coming after the Black Arts and multiculturalist movements, hip-hop artists were less concerned with the “either/or” debates about balancing the need for independent institutions against the struggle to pull open society’s most powerful ones. Harris and other hip-hop artists leaned toward a “both/and” outlook. They were empowered to see their struggle as one of taking over spaces—think of the b-boys crowding city corners with

their boom-boxes or graffiti-writers commandeering public transit systems for their art—and using mainstream access to help build indie foundations.

Once barriers to access fell, the transformation and expansion of the content became the primary concern. The emergent aesthetic has been described only half-jokingly by Thelma Golden, the star curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, as one of “post-Blackness.” Harris and others call it “the hip-hop aesthetic.” “For me, everything that I do, it’s hip-hop,” Harris says. “And going into this space, it’s not me going into someone’s space. It’s me going in, making hip-hop.”

Harris says he ignores questions of audience and venue while he is in the act of creation. “That stops the whole process of inspiration for me. I just gotta go in and do what inspires,” he says. “When I’m creating it, I’m just coming from the idea of a pure movement—the philosophy of that, because I am hip-hop.”

But in fact, Harris does struggle with how to present hip-hop in the concert hall. The rough language of his work—like in the first version of *Rome and Jewels*—quickly became an issue. “A lot of people struggled with Rennie about that, and I think that he kind of got it, that it didn’t need to be there,” Faure reflects. “It needed to be toned down and made more universal and more acceptable.”

“That’s part of what defines you is that language,” she says. “What do you keep to be true to yourself?”

After the breakout acclaim for *Rome and Jewels*, Harris was drawn into the modern dance world quickly. Presenters sought him out, offered him residencies, and introduced him to a wide range of contemporary choreographers and dancers. He had suddenly been inducted into a whole new peer group.

Carbonneau says that Harris’s introduction to West African dance by Reginald Yates, followed by Puremovement’s tour with Chuck Davis’s DanceAfrica and travel with Davis through Senegambia moved Harris into a new direction, one that makes his dance relevant to the growing African Heritage dance movement.

Harris admits to being fascinated by hip-hop’s connections to African and Asian dance forms. In a recent work, *Lorenzo’s Oil*, Harris connects what he calls popping’s illusion-making aesthetic to Japanese *butoh*. He often refers to the spirituality that he believes those forms

offer. But he argues that such knowledge simply extends his hip-hop aesthetic. “The foundation is hip-hop but when I begin to change the aesthetic of it, the quality, how the movement is presented, then it takes a new form,” he says.

Despite his fruitful encounters with the dance establishment, he downplays their influence and insists on his

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lack of formal training. “I took a ballet class when I was thirteen ‘cause some priest thought I could dance,” he says. “You had to wear them tights. I was done.”

He often plays this line for laughs. The old ditched-the-ballet story is a way of signaling to his peers that he’s not one of *those* kinds of dancers. It reveals a bit of hip-hop machismo at odds with his searing onstage critiques of masculinity and homophobia. But his defensiveness is also instinctive, perhaps also a simultaneous reaction to criticism he sometimes receives from his own hip-hop peers.

“[Harris] came up with his way of looking at hip-hop,” says Dionisio of Full Circle, “and his famous word was ‘deconstruction,’ deconstructing hip-hop movement. I’m like, well, it looked deconstructed to us when we first did it anyway. So maybe it’s to your advantage to do that, but we still have to be working hard to construct a folkloric legacy.”

B-girl and Dionisio’s partner in Full Circle, Ana “Rokafella” Garcia adds, “In New York, everyone is always pressuring you, ‘What’s new?’ ‘What’s next?’ So the folklore, the traditional movement, people haven’t really trained in it. It’s about, ‘What are you fusing (hip-hop) with? What are you mixing it with?’”

“People are deconstructing it, but the real story—and how hip-hop tells a story—is not being done,” concludes Dionisio. “It’s always being done through Shakespeare or through *The Nutcracker*. And we have our own Picassos, our own Michelangelos.”

Harris, who has hired Dionisio and Garcia to teach master-classes at the Legends Festival, would not disagree. In the mold of the Black Arts aesthetes and multiculturalists, he believes that hip-hop, as black performance, is the

equal of any genre. He argues that hip-hop performance should never settle for being racial self-esteem sessions or postmillennial minstrel shows. “It’s not about *affirmation* and it’s not about, ‘We can do *this*’ and ‘It’s *expression* for us,’” Harris says. “We convince ourselves that we are *only* entertainers. You know, we’re flipping and jumping around and all that. But how can we say what we need to say and be expressive?”

Still, he breaks from some of the pioneers on the issue of maintaining the culture’s supposed purity. “You want tradition, but you have to accept change. You have to make room for it,” he says. “What about the little genius who came up with shit no one had ever seen in their life before?”

## HARRIS’S INTEREST IN THE AESTHETIC OF CULTURAL INTERWEAVING EXPRESSES THE VERY DNA OF HIP-HOP.

The culture’s founding figures, the Jamaican-American DJ Kool Herc and the sons of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, didn’t work within the essentializing, salad-bowl conception of multiculturalism, in which cultures are thrown into the bowl whole and fixed. Instead, hip-hop was the kind of cultural process that Robin D.G. Kelley has termed “polycultural,” a messier dynamic in which cultures exert constant and mutual influence on each other.

In 2003’s *Facing Mekka*, Harris took this worldview towards a utopian vision of a new hip-hop world that might bridge street and theater, high and low, avant-garde and popular, African and American. Alluding obliquely to Malcolm X’s post-Nation-of-Islam pilgrimage, Harris’s magnum opus is about the joy and peace that comes with connection.

In the brilliant score—performed by a five-piece band and composed by long-time collaborator Darrin M. Ross—North African Arabic calls to prayer shade into ambient turntable cuts, loops of Scottish bagpipes and Indian tablas merge into the Yoruba rhythms that bridge Afro-Cuban and West African sounds as if a DJ were

cross-fading a world mix. Later, beat-boxer Kenny Muhammad takes the mic with double-speed drum-n-bass rhythms. Muhammad and DJ Evil Tracy make the hip-hop process of mixing, layering, and blending explicit.

## HARRIS SAYS HE IS MOST INTERESTED IN A “THROUGH-LINE,” IN MOVEMENT AS A PLACE WHERE CULTURES CROSS.

Harris comes onstage in the white garb of a pilgrim. Five women and two men appear in red, at peace, in front of a scrim projecting billowing clouds in *Koyaanisqatsi*-like fashion. They begin to move in unison, first pointing to the sky and stepping back, shaking like Sunday churchgoers, then bending and kicking in West African styles. The men leave and the women wind and dash left and right in a movement similar to the South Side of Chicago style known as “juke.” Later they stomp and wave white cloths, an old dance that survived the Middle Passage.

Two men come out and grasp hands in the center of stage, drop down with a leg out, and circle each other. These moves are from the Angolan and Brazilian martial art of *capoeira*, an idea Wood later develops into a stunning solo. The movements resemble a gentler form of the gang-derived dances of b-boying’s uprocks; they no longer signify disparagement and competition, but spiritual enlightenment.

Harris says he is most interested in a “through-line,” in movement as a place where cultures cross. “I’m interested in those kind of connections, and then challenging [the audience], and then playing with the through-line. ‘Through-line’ is what confuses everybody,” he says. For him, the explosive moves of b-boying relate not only to early jazz dance, but to modern dance. “They all break up and they fall right in parallel with what people call trained dance, but it totally exists in our world, too, and that’s what I’m interested in bringing out.”

Now Harris—whose process, Puremovement dancer Makeda Thomas says, is “moreso than others about being present”—finds himself at a vista point in his career, a moment to look back. Puremovement has performed

retrospectives now for the better part of the last year, which will climax in the appearance in Philadelphia.

Harris describes his works from *Endangered Species* to *Facing Mekka* as composing a complete arc. He jokes, “I think that for the next fifteen years, I’ll be doing some other work that’s not necessarily built on my spiritual state. ‘Cause you know, after all that, it’s like, “Okay, Rennie, we get you. Alright, yeah, yeah, you in pain. Well, see ya later, sir.””

Harris says he is in the process of creating a typically hybrid new work, something he calls a “b-boy ballet love story,” which he believes will begin the second arc of his career. He is looking for a place to live and contemplating moving out of Philadelphia. And he is also writing a book about the history of hip-hop dance.

He is talking about the book, but he could be speaking about his career, and its art of connecting and of finding the through-line. He says, “At the end of

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But the through-line of Harris’s work has traced a path from isolation to connection, and conflict to empathy. Harris may not have transformed concert dance into a populist artform, and he may not have convinced hip-hop populists that its aesthetic future lies in the concert hall, but he has undeniably created as impressive a body of work as anyone has in hip-hop or American dance.

“He could have had a lucrative and wildly successful career in concert dance terms if he had really given people what they wanted at a minimum: highly virtuosic hip-hop adapted for the stage, calculated for maximum physical and visceral thrills,” says Carbonneau. “But there has been nothing calculated about his career. What we have seen instead with Rennie is the trajectory of an artistic journey, both aesthetic and spiritual in nature.”

the day, it’s about dance and it’s not about hip-hop. I’m coming from a hip-hop place but it’s the spiritualism within the dance of it, which then is really about our need for the culture of freedom. Our new secular culture and religion called freedom, you know what I mean?” \*

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