



A Love So Pure

Rennie Harris celebrates 15 years as a hip-hop ambassador.

by Leo Beletsky

Hip-hop as a cultural movement resides comfortably in the American mainstream. But 15 years ago—when Rennie Harris launched Puremovement—things were different.

The company sprang from the street and club dance scene in notorious North Philly, where Rennie Harris first amassed his popping and stepping moves as part of the Scanner Boys, a local B-boy crew. By the time he graduated high school, Harris was performing and teaching Philadelphia-style B-boying across the country.

In 1992, still in his late 20s, he asked several fellow Scanner Boys who were UArts students, as well as some friends, to be in a piece he was creating for a local movement-theater festival. Puremovement was born.

The founding of the company was never entangled in lofty ambitions to conquer Carnegie Hall, or crusading visions of bringing hip-hop to middle America.

Starting out, the group's choices of technique and repertoire weren't cerebral or academic. B-boying was the only genre many of the dancers were conversant in. The subject matter of their work—the pathos of urban life—was an inescapable reflection of the collective experience they brought to the table.

More than anything, Harris recalls, members of Puremovement wanted “to pay our rent doing what we loved.” “When dance is part of your culture, the deep stuff is just understood,” he explains.

The specific constellation of personalities, talent and timing made Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM) a major player in pushing hip-hop dance and culture into the heart of the American experience. As the popularity of rap crossed cultural, geographic and generational boundaries, the stage was set for challenging the world of concert halls and highbrow critics to see hip-hop on par with ballet, opera or chamber music.

“If a hundred people say the sky is falling, it might behoove you to look up and see if it's falling,” says Harris, adding he didn't have a patent on the concept. But he did leave the competition far behind.

The success of Puremovement has as much to do with where and when it started as with how far it's come. Had it been a formulaic novelty act designed to popularize the African-American inner-city vernacular, the company probably wouldn't be celebrating its 15th anniversary.

Instead Harris, his dancers and other collaborators continued to build on their initial success by broadening the horizons of their work.

Through the years the company sought input from prominent musicians as well as movement, theater and multimedia artists—many of whom work outside the hip-hop realm. Harris and members of RHPM traveled to Brazil, Africa and elsewhere to research the roots of hip-hop and draw on other cultures for inspiration.

Like the music of DJs who accompany many RHPM pieces, the choreography integrates samples of movement, style and structure from diverse sources. Spoken-word segments and video installations add a theatrical element and elevate the spiritual level of the performances to reflect the ceremonial origins of hip-hop as a reincarnation of African and African-American dance traditions.

Meanwhile, improvisation and a collaborative working style help the company continue to push the envelope, and land prominent artistic grants and awards. For years RHPM has had a packed tour schedule that includes concert dates at some of the most prestigious venues around the world. At the same time Harris' shrewd business sense helps RHPM make a profit.

Through all this growth, the company makes an effort to stay true to its roots. Harris and other company members maintain a busy teaching schedule—informing and demonstrating the development of African and Afro-Caribbean dance into present-day hip-hop—which has earned him the title “ambassador of hip-hop.”

Aside from outreach activities, Harris puts on Philly's annual summer Illadelph Festival which teaches all things hip-hop including music, dance, history and business basics.

Although RHPM is as much a Philadelphia ambassador to the dance world as the Roots are to music, the company rarely appears on Philly stages. That's why the upcoming retrospective at the Kimmel—a special three-day residency supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Dance Advance—shouldn't be missed.

The retrospective opens Friday with an evening of old favorites. Both *March of the Antmen* and *Endangered Species* are dedicated to victims of urban violence. Saturday's program is the evening-length work *Rome & Jewels*—a hip-hop version of *West Side Story* revamped to reflect the realities of today's urban life. It's a highly acclaimed and elaborate production which includes video installations and spoken-word delivery of original Shakespeare.

The Philadelphia premiere of the fully staged version of *Facing Mekka* concludes the weekend. Drawing on folk traditions of Africa and the Caribbean Basin, the collage explores the heritage of hip-hop through the eyes of a troupe that's recognized as one of its principal ambassadors.

At 15, RHPM is at its zenith. But that doesn't mean it's gotten easy for Rennie Harris.

Now that he's over 40, Harris talks about family, health and slowing down. He's also writing a memoir tentatively entitled *Losing My Religion*, about his life story and spiritual journey.

In other words, there may not be a RHPM 25th anniversary retrospective, so go see this one.