

MAG ZINE DANCE

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

FEBRUARY 2007

HIP HOP'S
GRANDMASTER
RENNIE
HARRIS

LOVE
WALTZED IN
5 SWEETHEARTS
OF DANCE

THEY FEEL
PRETTY
THE TROCKS
TURN OUT

AUDITIONS
GUIDE 2007
LISTINGS,
INSIDER TIPS
& MORE!

dancemagazine.com

FEBRUARY 2007



0 74470 64639 6
USA \$4.95 CANADA \$6.50



PRINCE SCAREKROW & the EMERALD CITY

BY BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

Rennie Harris' Hip Hop Life

How does it feel to be 15? Ask Rennie Harris, whose hip hop dance company, Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM), celebrates its “quinceaños” this month at Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center. “Prince” was Harris’ street name as an adolescent growing up in North Philadelphia; “ScareKrow” stuck with him later on. Despite the tags attached to its practitioners, hip hop culture is more than a teenage pastime—it’s a way of life.

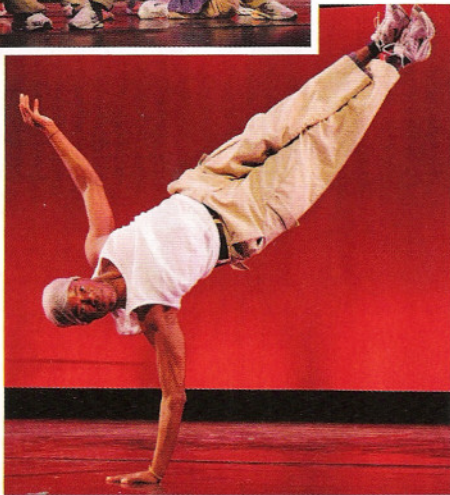
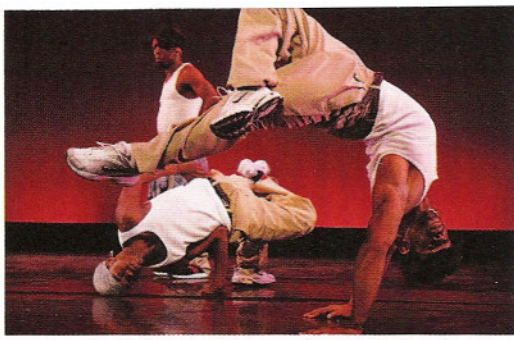
Harris has crafted and transformed this street-smart, urban dance form into a complex, concert-stage product that offers a mix of messages to diverse audiences—young-old, black-brown-white, working-and-middle class. This is no mean achievement. When RHPM

began, hip hop culture—including graffiti, deejay artistry, rap music and poetry, and the range of contemporary African-based dance forms known as hip hop and its cousin, break dancing—was contained in African American (and Latino) communities. Nineteen eighties films like *Beat Street* brought the culture to mainstream America. But it took Harris to bring the hip hop dancing body to the same stages that hosted modern and ballet companies. Hip hop influences abound in today’s dances



Above:
Afaliah
Afelyone &
Brandon
“Peace”
Albright.
Left:
Afelyone,
Harris, &
Albright

Portraits by Steve Vaccariello



Harris' signature piece, *P-Funk*
 Top: Back to front: James "Cricket" Colter, Keith "Remedy" Stallworth, Duane Lee Holland;
 Center: Stallworth, Leslie Rivera, Alonzo Carter, Albright, Holland
 Right: Stallworth

"In Europe they seem to really love us. It's only here that we struggle. When we are overseas it's like we are superstars."

—Rennie Harris

Jewels (2000) and *Facing Mekka* (2003). A hop hop ballet infused with rap-poetry arias, *Rome & Jewels* is the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, though more indebted to *West Side Story* (the Capulets and Montagues are the Caps and the Monster Q's) and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film than to Shakespeare. Still, the original tale about star-crossed teenage love remains the theme. Words are seamlessly integrated into the movement palette, and throughout the piece Harris achieves an amazing fusion of dancing bodies and verbal parrying. (See "Rome and Jewels," Sept. 2000).

In his version, Juliet/Jewels doesn't appear onstage. Instead, she's an invisible presence who drives the action and stirs the desires of the male cast. Although the heroine is absent, women are present. Without making an issue of gender, Harris has assimilated them into the male ensemble, functioning as members of the warring families.

Facing Mekka is a horse of another color. The female presence is front and center, with an ensemble of six whose dancing fills the stage with strength, power, and beauty. Although the movement is more overtly

in works by Doug Elkins, Trey McIntyre, and Matthew Neenan, to name a few. But Harris takes the credit for bringing the genuine article to concert dance audiences and luring hip hop spectators to concert dance venues. Through his choreographic overhauls he has made theater dance history.

This native Philadelphian has been blurring boundaries and building bridges since early on in his career. The intimacy of Philadelphia's dance world offered a fluid environment for performers and choreographers to collaborate across categories, and Harris took advantage of the opportunity. He joined the Scanner Boys, a poppin' crew, while in high school. In the mid-1980s he performed on the Fresh Festival tours—the first organized hip hop/rap road shows in the U.S. In the early 1990s he was a founding member of Splinter Group, Philly's short-lived world dance and music ensemble, and he performed in the city's Movement Theater International Festival. Around the same time he formed RHPM. Thus began his "beyond break dance" journey of choreographing narratives based on the hip hop movement vocabulary and his real life experiences. (See "Rennie Harris: Pure Spirit and Sheer Joy," Aug. 1999.)

RHPM's 15th anniversary retrospective includes some of Harris' signature works: *March of the Antmen*, *P-Funk*, *Endangered Species*, and his two evening-length sagas, *Rome &*

African than in his earlier works, it is filtered through Harris' lens and reminds us to acknowledge that the origin of hip hop's pyrotechnics is West African dance. Some sequences are performed in slow motion, allowing us to see these building blocks clearly. The work can be understood as a meditation in movement, music, and chants (no raps this time) on the connections between world spiritual and cultural traditions, including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and traditional African practices. Performing his legendary freeze-pop-lock-slow-fast-frantic-cool movements, Harris is the "Zen-hop" spirit who bookends the work with his two solos. He crosses the stage, ghostlike, several times during this 90-minute piece. He may well be the dreamer, and the dance itself his dream.

As a whole, Harris' creative process is a through-line based on personal experience. Reflecting on *Rome and Mekka*, the hip hop maestro had this to say: "I was creating *Mekka* the same time I was creating *Rome & Jewels*. *Rome* is a manifestation of me; *Mekka* is the place 'he' goes after he passes away in *Rome & Jewels*; and *Prince ScareKrow's Road to the Emerald City* (the piece Harris is currently creating) is the dark place this character journeys to from *Facing Mekka*." This semiautobiographical figure is "facing his fears of living, finding no resolve but accepting his path in a way that is the beginning of some sort of resolution."