

Ida Dances with Irv: A Smooth exploration of the Harlem Renaissance

Written by



One of the Twin Cities favorite jazz masters, Irv Williams (“Mr. Smooth”) and the Irv Williams Quartet, will appear alongside centenarian choreographer/dancer Ida Arbeit and the Kairos Dance Theatre company, Sunday, April 18, 4 pm, at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis.

Kairos, under the direction of Maria Genné, is confounding audience expectations with its company of professional and avocational dancers, ages 4 -100 and differently abled, involving audiences in often emotionally rich, enjoyable and inspiring dance theatre experiences. In *Ida Dances with Irv*, Kairos offers a look into an exciting moment in American history – the Harlem Renaissance, with performers personally linked to that time, in a contemporary interpretation.

Harlem, NY, between 1920-1930, experienced an outburst of creative activity in many art forms. That period of time was originally named “The New Negro Movement” and later became known as the Harlem Renaissance. More than a social revolt against racism, it was a celebration by the Black “whose who” of musicians, composers, poets, dramatists, visual artists and intellectuals of all things African American that first attracted prosperous Black middle class audiences.

Beloved Twin Cities tenor sax player Williams, 90, learned Al Green’s “Body and Soul” –at the age of 15-- from a transcription of a Harlem Renaissance luminary Coleman Hawkins performance, published in *Downbeat Magazine*. Irv credits that song with cementing his enthusiasm for the instrument, and bringing authority to the tenor sax throughout the jazz music world. Williams has worked in bands fronted by performers like Ella Fitzgerald, Fletcher Henderson, Mary Lou Williams, Billy Eckstine’s orchestra and many other jazz luminaries at venues like the Apollo Theater in Harlem. He continues to play and record in the Twin Cities. He will be joined with other members of the Irv Williams Quartet for the performance, playing music from the era.

The ebullient Ida Arbeit, age 100, is a choreographer and dancer now living in Saint Paul. Arbeit has had a long career. As a young woman in the 1930s, she danced with American modern dance pioneer Helen Tamiris’ company on WPA Federal Dance Project wages of \$50 per week. Tamiris was a contemporary of Martha Graham, and Arbeit performed in the Tamiris show

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“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, Arbeit and her friends would travel up to Harlem for the music and nightlife. Since arriving in the Twin Cities two years ago, Arbeit has been collaborating with Genné and Kairos, and worked with Genné closely on this performance.

Kairos Artistic Director Maria Genné, full name Maria DuBois Genné, is named after Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, a scholar, writer, publisher, public intellectual and activist associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Her late mother, Noma Jensen Genné, worked as a field secretary for the NAACP national office in New York from 1943 - 47 under Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins, traveling the country north of the Mason-Dixon line doing “inter-cultural education” and encouraging community leaders to integrate their schools. Norma Jense Genne was a friend and colleague of Dr. Du Bois’ soon-to-be wife, Shirley Graham.

Ida Dances with Irv should be a feel-good audience pleasing collaboration with intriguing artists, great music and dance surprises, put together with Genné’s community-based approach of radical inclusion and celebration of diversity. Genné is collaborating with Arbeit on choreography. There should be opportunities for audience participation.

As the Harlem Renaissance was ultimately a celebration, so is the work of Kairos Dance Theatre, even though its work sometimes rests on a foundation that includes some pain and irony.

Genne said: “It is a thrill to work with Ida and Irv, and to attempt to bring some spirit and possibly form of Tamiris’ work forward with a collaborator – Ida – who comes directly from that time, and with Irv, who is also connected to it.”

“It’s wonderful working with Kairos and Ida. I’m meeting and working with very interesting people, and I’m having a lot of fun,” said Williams.

“I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about choreography – much better than thinking about my aches and pains,” said Arbeit.

Kairos Dance Theatre, founded in 1999, has a mission to transform lives through movement and story. Artistic Director Maria Genné is also the founder of the Kairos Dance Theatre’s national award-winning, evidence-based, arts and healthcare program for elders, The Dancing Heart™ – Vital Elders Moving in Community, that is positively transforming lives, saving significant healthcare costs and helping to create a new role in society for artists. Current institutional partners for the Dancing Heart include Wilder Foundation and the Ebenezer Fairview Foundation.

Ida Dances with Irv is presented in association with Intermedia Arts as part of their Catalyst Series. The performance is supported by The Metropolitan Regional Arts Council with funds from the Minnesota Legislature, Target, individual contributors and Kairos Dance Theatre.

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For more information about Irv Williams, visit <http://www.irvwilliams.com/>.

For more information about Kairos Dance Theatre, visit <http://www.kairosdance.org/>.

To see an exciting mini-documentary about the Dancing Heart™ program, Dancing Heart™ – Power to Nurture and Heal, click on the link in the lower left side of the front page of the Kairos web site.