

Their Eyes Were Watching God: Collage Dance Collective Brings a Literary Classic to Life

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April 29 and 30, Memphis-based Collage Dance Collective is set to premiere *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a new ballet reimagining Zora Neale Hurston's iconic 1937 novel of the same title. Choreographed by Collage artistic director Kevin Thomas and acclaimed choreographer Amy Hall Garner, this new work brings to life the classic tale of love, freedom, and self-realization.



Collage Dance Company artists rehearsing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Photo by David Roseberry, courtesy CDC.

Thomas and Collage co-founder Marcellus Harper felt inspired to interpret this book into a ballet because, as Harper says, “Black stories are absent from the canon of classical ballets.” Both leaders hope to reach new audiences with relatable stories that reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. The piece, which shares the program with Francisco Aviña’s *Letting Go To Let In* and Christopher L. Huggins’ *Enemy Behind the Gates*, tells the story of Janie Crawford, who defies the societal expectations of the 1930s South to pursue true love—a quest that takes three marriages to find. She evolves from being a 16-year-old forced into her first marriage to being a 40-year-old widow (twice over) who has finally found her voice. In their interpretation of the work, it’s important to both Thomas and Hall Garner that the most essential parts of Janie’s story come through clearly in the movement. They’re exploring elements of pantomime, literal gestures, and props so those who may not be familiar with the book will understand.

“It’s been a journey for me to start from just words and build up instead of starting from music,” shares Hall Garner, whose choreography credits include a slew of abstract ballets along with regional and off-Broadway musical theater work. The ballet’s libretto was written by scriptwriter and Collage’s director of marketing Shalishah Franklin, who had the task of

capturing over two decades of Janie’s life into 30 minutes. Of creating the libretto for such a “well-loved and fiercely protected piece of American literature,” Franklin says: “I took great care to preserve the essence of the story, humanity of the characters, and Neale Hurston’s meticulous commitment to cultural authenticity.”



Collage Dance Company artists rehearsing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Photo by David Roseberry, courtesy CDC.

Beyond the libretto, Thomas and Hall Garner explain that collaboration among the creative team also influences the movement and how they’re telling the story. “It’s not just one person putting this together,” Thomas shares when speaking of the research the entire team has done to develop the work. For instance, the pear tree—one of the major symbols in the book—is an integral part of the set from scenic designer Alexander Woodward. Lighting director Wilburn Bonnell has designed what Hall Garner describes as a “warm, textured, sepia-tone” mood that elicits a “down-home, Southern feeling.” Costume designer Andrea “Abeo” Brown created more than three dozen period-inspired costumes reflective of the African American experience between 1905 and 1925. And, finally, Thomas is excited about the opportunity he’s had to weigh in on the ballet’s original score, which is a first for the company. Created by award-winning composer Quinn Mason, the music will be performed live by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Kalena Bovell. “This is the most diverse creative team of a ballet that I know,” Hall Garner says, “and I think you’ll see that onstage.”

Two things are certain for the choreographers—their collaboration and rehearsal process with the 15-member cast has been “easy and fluid,” and there’s room for the ballet to grow. Thomas would love to expand the piece and potentially even tour it. Hall Garner agrees: “Once audiences see this incarnation of [the story], I think they’ll want to see a lengthier piece,” she says. “This could be really huge.”