

Review: Faustin Linyekula's Twin Peaks of Mourning and Joy



Faustin Linyekula and fellow dancers performing "In Search of Dinozord" at the Skirball Center. Andrea Mohlin/The New York Times

By **Siobhan Burke**

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About halfway through [Faustin Linyekula's](#) "In Search of Dinozord" on Saturday, amid fragments of Mozart's "Requiem" and organ music by Arvo Pärt, a lighter melody drifted through the theater: the refrain of an incoming Skype call.

Joining the performance on screen, live from Sweden, was [Antoine Vumilia Muhindo](#), a Congolese actor, writer, stage director and former political prisoner. A passport issue, we learned, had kept him from

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being at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts at New York University in person.

“I’m very happy to be free,” he said, before recalling his involvement in the rebel movement that ousted Mobutu Sese Seko, his country’s leader of 32 years, in 1997. “But to me one price of freedom is exile, and this is just one aspect of being in exile.”

His presence distilled the larger sense of displacement, of splintered communities and obscured histories, that runs through Mr. Linyekula’s haunting and haunted work, which was receiving its United States premiere as part of the French Institute Alliance Française’s [Crossing the Line Festival](#). Mr. Linyekula — who grew up in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo and whose dance-theater company, Studios Kabako, is based there — was also in town to create “[Festival of Dreams](#),” a work featuring New York City hip-hop dancers that took over Roberto Clemente Plaza in the South Bronx on Saturday afternoon. Seen back to back, they formed a dyad of mourning and joy.

“Dinozord” summons past friendships and political struggles, reckoning with what it means to seek beauty, to write or sing or dance, when surrounded by violence and loss. Mr. Linyekula was joined by the dancers Jeannot Kumbonyeki, Papy Ebotani and Yves Mwamba; the countertenor Serge Kakudji; and the actor Papy Maurice Mbwiti.

Between passages of precarious movement — a skittering dance for Mr. Ebotani that ends with him collapsing to the floor; a duet in which one man arranges another’s unresponsive limbs; an electrifying solo for Mr. Kumbonyeki to Jimi Hendrix’s “Voodoo Chile” — the cast

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shepherds a red chest filled with tattered papers across the stage, carrying it like a coffin or letting its contents spill onto the floor. Those notes are said to belong to Mr. Linyekula's friend Kabako, a writer with lofty literary dreams who died of plague, "a disease I thought only existed in books," Mr. Linyekula says.

Through memories shared about him, Kabako becomes an elusive, there-but-not character, as does Dinozord, who, we're told, was a dancer in a 2006 precursor to this work. Here he seems more mythical than real, an emblem of disappearance. Speaking through text projected on a wooden panel, he identifies himself as "the last of my tribe," comparing himself at once to Mozart's "Requiem" — a "final flare of virtuosity" — and to all that society has deemed unworthy, "the spittoon of the republic."

Whose stories endure and whose vanish? At one point we see photos that Mr. Muhindo took in prison and hear his recollections: "Torture was on the daily agenda until it became another organ in my body." As the dancers stand in place and circle their hips, it could be their own memories setting them in motion.

The same could be said of the cast of "Festival of Dreams," a presentation of *Crossing the Line and Dancing in the Streets* directed by Mr. Linyekula and Moya Michael. Twenty-one dancers from *It's Showtime NYC*, a program that supports the professional development of subway dancers, each had moments to shine, breaking out backflips, handstands, gliding footwork and spidery contortions. But more indelible was how fluidly they worked together, passing energy to whoever was in the spotlight. When they formed a circle, the edges were never static.

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