

Strong performances make Kuntu's 'Keepers of the Dream' a rich historical collage

By **CHRISTOPHER RAWSON**

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"No overseer ever overcame my Mama," says one of the characters early in "Keepers of the Dream," describing life under slavery. "Fight, and if you can't fight, kick," she remembers her Mama saying, "... and bite."

"Bite" — that's exactly what "Keepers of the Dream" has, the bite of a bitter history bravely lived and of indomitable lives pursued with vigor, creativity and faith. One half the sometimes somber pleasure of this collage of quotes, songs, scenes, memories and joyous testimony is to be reminded of the rich history it goes spinning through, ticking off a couple of centuries of African-American women, heroes of resistance, self-affirmation and hope.

The other half of the pleasure is the performances, which are occasionally awkward but obliterate that shortcoming with a brave intensity and personal investment that mirrors that of their subjects. Creator-director Jacqueline Moscou has chosen performers with enough personal dimension — even eccentricity — to give the life on stage an authenticity worthy of sharing our attention with the historical life it portrays.

In fact, the true subject of this event is more spiritual than historic. The factual nuggets are sometimes impressive, and there is sustenance in being reminded of a great tradition of protest, achievement and prophecy, but the history is ultimately subsidiary to the common thread of spiritual witness, a witness suitably matched by Moscou and her five performers.

As pure text, "Keepers of the Dream" is less successful. It lacks apparent shape or structure. You wouldn't call it a play. But Moscou endows it with texture and soul.

There are some historic revelations. Which among us knows as much about Sojourner Truth as is apparent in the fine feminist speech with which Mayme Williams brings her to life? Which of us knew of the fierceness with which Harriet Tubman ran the underground railway? The simple litany of names seems more dues-paying than effective theater, but I like the portraits on the rear wall. I couldn't name as many as I should.

"Keepers of the Dream" acknowledges the stream of talent and hope nourished by the church. Nothing is said about the generations when the church served mainly to sustain the status quo, but plenty of credit is given to the role of the recent black church as midwife to the civil rights revolution. And the church also contributes its music, dancing and testifying. The most electric section of the show is some wonderful ecstatic and infectious dancing.



Clockwise from top left: Mayme Williams, Terri Bridgett, Bonita Thomas and Wabei Siyolwe in Kuntu's "Keepers of the Dream."

performing with a shining innocence. When she sings and plays the blues she has the authentic feel (and a touch of the quaver) of a vintage record.

My favorite segment is Teri Bridgett's Moms Mabley. Bridgett's great virtue is to commit herself to something 200 percent. With her Moms, the result is laughter beyond laughter, achieving an insight beyond whatever her subject may be.

The most accomplished actor is Wabei Siyolwe, the ensemble's one non-Pittsburgher, a welcome addition. She mesmerizes with her young girl terrorized while trying to integrate the high school in Little Rock. The fifth performer is Karla Washinton: at her strongest in her reflex-

able — the girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing, "Strange Fruit." There is recognition of the recent resurgence of racial intolerance. But "Keepers" always moves briskly on. One of its pleasures is to introduce some historic figures we don't know at all, such as two elderly Mississippi activists who acknowledge that a lot of the Civil Rights/voter registration work had to be done by them, because "black men have always been the target."

Near the end, the performers pay personal tribute to their own mothers and grandmothers. But we all share their legacy and that of Mary McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks, Phillis Wheatley, Shirley Chisholm, Ruby Dee, Willamae Smith. Ma-

stage REVIEW

'KEEPERS OF THE DREAM: A CELEBRATION OF SIGNIFICANT SISTAHS!'

WHEN: Kuntu Repertory Theatre at Hamburg Studio, 13th and Bingham, South Side.

WHEN: 11 a.m. and 8 p.m. today, 8 p.m. tomorrow, 4 p.m. Sunday.

TICKETS: \$10-\$15; 412-431-CITY