

Wanda's Picks December 2019

 wandaspicks.com/wandas-picks-december-2019

Season's Greetings!

I hope 2019 was kind to everyone and if not kind, at least full of important lessons and opportunities for growth. Alas, we are almost through it. What follows are a list of programs I've hosted this month on *Wanda's Picks Radio Show*. It has been really busy this year and especially these last few months and so, while I have not been able to file all the stories I have written, I have continued broadcasting.

I encourage fans to download the app and listen in or at least see whose work I am highlighting so that you do not miss important work, work that speaks to what it means to be human beings at a time when person-hood (especially yours and mine), for some, is a negotiable commodity. Art is a way to address the absence of Blackness in such spaces. In fact, Blackness is its own reality and brings its own value, value added, value+able, abilities others lack because these others lack heart.

I have had the opportunity to speak to and experience a few moments this year and towards the end of this year moments that acknowledged my Blackbeingness. This acknowledgement I'd like to share with you who support the work, the effort at visibility and consciousness in spaces where not only are we against the walls, these walls are porous so we flow rather than stand — a state that is hard to maintain as gravity-bound creatures who instinctively crave more grounded plains.

I have tried to at least post the shows with extended bios on [Interchange](#), my blog. The links are in the titles:

<https://wandasabir.blogspot.com/2019/11/wandas-picks-radio-show-wednesday.html>

<https://wandasabir.blogspot.com/2019/12/wandas-picks-radio-show-wednesday-dec-4.html>

https://wandasabir.blogspot.com/2019/12/wandas-picks-radio-show-wednesday_11.html

On the Fly:

Let Us Break Bread at Oakland Symphony Sunday, Dec. 15, 2019, 4 p.m.; Oakland Ballet's Graham Lustig's Nutcracker at the Paramount Theatre, Dec. 21-22 (1 and 5 p.m. shows); Soulful Christmas at Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, Friday-Sunday, Dec. 13-15 and Friday-Sunday, Dec. 20-22; KOLA: An Afro Diasporic Remix of the Nutcracker at Castlemont High School, Dec. 12-15 and Dec. 19-22. 8 p.m. except Sundays at 2 p.m. African American Shakes presents Cinderella, Dec. 20-22 at the Herbst Theatre. 2 shows on Sat., matinee on Sunday.

The People’s Conservatory presents: “KOLA: An Afro Diasporic Remix,” a different take on the holiday classic



RyanNicole Austin & Rozz Nash, KOLA Directors. Photo credit: Stephanie Lister KQED

In “KOLA: An Afro Diasporic Remix of the Nutcracker”—we meet Nzingha, an orphan, who lives with her grandparents. Actor Makeda Booker’s character doesn’t remember her mother and resents her abandonment. Though she knows her grandparents – actors Dame Drummer and Jennifer Jones, love her, the child feels a sense of isolation at the family holiday party and spends time playing games on her phone. While everyone mingles then dances, Nzingha moves awkwardly when her



Grandmother (Jennifer Johns) and Grandfather (Dame Drummer) with Nzingha (Makeda Booker).Photo credit: Wanda Sabir



Uncle Victor (James Davis) and Nzingha (Makeda Booker) talk while Mom (Karma Smart) dances. Photo credit: Wanda Sabir

Uncle Victor (James “Banks” Davis), whom she hasn’t seen in a while asks her to join him. Later, the next day, he seeks his niece out as she does her chores, and shares with her stories of his sister, her mother.

And so begins the journey where Nzingha guided by Uncle Victor, transformed into Esu (the Orisha of the Crossroads) takes her on a Sankofa journey so she can learn grasp her historic past to better understand her present.



"Bahia" arranged by Baba Zeke, Yemanja choreography by Karma Smart. Photo credit: Wanda Sabir



The Shore arranged by Calvin Choice, Baba Tacuma, and Baba Zeke. Choreography by Asatu Hall, performed by Jennifer Johns. Photo credit: Wanda Sabir

Crossing bridges made from bones Nzingha dances through Bahia where she meets Yemanja—goddess of the sweet waters, then into Cuba where she meets Oshun, goddess of love, and Ayiti where she dances



Cuba arranged by Calvin Holmes, Oshun choreography by Asatu Hall and Karma Smart.
Photo credit: Wanda Sabir

Yanvolou, for Ogou and the Ancestors, Gede. It is a dance used to reinforce community and solidarity. Nzingha grows in self-confidence, her leke or ritual beads earned after she dances through each divine portal. The next stop is Southern Spain where Nzingha, also named for a warrior, meets Oya, the goddess of change and transformation. This stop is the beginning of the "great (re)turn," this time accompanied by Mamiwata, Obatala, and Esu. The child carries her nkisi or juju with her. She is wrapped in literal rainbows as she alights in New York at the African Burial Grounds (Wall Street), dances into Congo Square in New Orleans then heads back to Oakland where the enchantment continues in Osacr Grant Plaza where Nzingha meets young grandmother, young grandfather. Home again, she meets her mother again in the mirror and embraces her as she embraces this episode of her journey, now complete.



The Swipe, Dame Drummer, composer. Choreography by Adriana Wilson. Photo credit: Wanda Sabir

For each leg of the literal journey master percussionists and other choreographers join lead choreographer, Rozz Nash and co-writer, theatre director, RyanNicole Austin – who was running the sound, opening night. 500+ students from over a dozen Oakland and other East Bay schools are involved as performers, composers and costume/set designers, including OSA, Anna Yates, Northern Light, Pear Tree Community School, West Oakland Middle School, Envision Academy Middle Grades, Park Day, Head Royce, and Latitude High School.

Jennifer Johns is also co-writer and composer. She is both grandmother and Mamiwata. Ultimately, it is African divinity which is where Nzingha, orphaned, finds what she believes lost. Once she steps into the chasm holding Esu's hand or cane, it is trust that ultimately rewards Nzingha with the answers she seeks. Once she commits to the trip, she doesn't let go until she reaches home sweet home.

It is a beautiful story, one of hope and love. KOLA continues at Castlemont High School, Thursday-Saturday, December 19-21, 7 p.m. Sunday, December 22 at 2 p.m. It is a family friendly production. For tickets visit www.thepeoplesconservatory.org

There is free parking on the side of the school campus by the fence near the childcare center signage. Keep driving all the way to the back.



Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch in *mouth/full* at CounterPulse presents: Performing Diaspora 2019

Performing Diaspora 2019 at CounterPulse is really wonderful this year. It's always wonderful but the three artists: Cherie Hill's IrieDance in *She-Verse* and Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch in *mouth/full* this weekend, Thursday-Sat., Dec. 12-14, 7:45 p.m.-9 p.m. (Don't be late) — is "more" wonderful.

How often are Africans or Black people VIP because they are African or Black people?! We are royalty because of our melanin. We are called out for an exclusive, pre-show experience that sets the tone for the evening, perhaps for the rest of our lives, definitely for 2020.

It is experiences like *Performing Diaspora 2019* that hold us when the days are chilly with whiteness— a crisp breeze that seeks to rob us of our Black Souls, even when we know, that is not *really* possible as we grab doorknobs and other objects that have more permanence than flesh to buffer ourselves against what happens when stage coaches return to pumpkin state. All Cinderella had was a dream, right?

How easy it is so easy slip into antebellum attitudes what with white folks claiming "fragility," feigned helplessness, as an excuse for structural racism. "We're just too weak ethically to do any better, so adjust your attitudes Black people," is the unspoken reality of Blackness in America if you are a descendant of enslaved Africans.

The two-ness W.E.B. Du Bois writes about in his “Souls of Black Folks” is what saved and saves America from complete destruction. There are places we can go to be free. Within the craziness, artists like Cherie Hill; Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch have opened with their work windows into spaces where Blackness — just everyday Blackfolkness is a ticket or key or pass code into rooms others seated behind us out of sight and mind/full/ness cannot enter.

Theatre is ritual. It is a place where we can imagine and then practice another reality. *She-Verse* and *mouth/full* are the scaffolding. Blackness our shelter. It is our protection from artificial Gama rays. In the theatre that evening “darkness” is currency. It is our shelter as we ascend to Giovanni’s room where magic is conjured. Spells are cast and we are sworn to secrecy. The ritual is for us.

And then we return changed.

Lights are on us as we see magic carpets . . . take our seats in the pews, some seated closer to the literal pulpit than others . . . and then the paradigm shifts. We are back on the slave ship— the actors are wearing clergy robes. We are protected by the light, by the red and white barriers, by the altars and stained windows, by the sacrifices — ancestors’ lives, bones paving the railroad cross the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.

We have lifetime vouchers — already stamped, to spirit ferry passage— not Spirit Airlines, rather links to a People who could fly and another branch of the family who walked from Ibo Landing back home. They just walked into the water back to Africa. They were magical like that.



Cherie Hill's IrieDance in *She-Verse* at CounterPulse presents: Performing Diaspora

Cherie Hill's *She-Verse* stands at the intersections directing traffic and often stopping the same. She is shadow and presence. She is steady and stable. She is mother and earth. She is see forever and what is past. Her children walk, crawl, roll, move staccato into habitats familiar and hostile.

Earlier, we Africans keep moving; however, for the moment we sit in pews sanctified and holy until intermission when the set is remixed and we are among the swine and bovine where we get to practice Blackness unapologetically. It is a good thing to rehearse.

We sing songs of freedom, lifting our feet, raising our hands, waving hands the way we do when holy spirit lifts us up like waves on a ocean — caught up in a breeze. . . . This movement is not televised yet voyeurs are seated just behind us wishing perhaps they were Black- at least for this cinematic moment. But we don't let them play. No one breaks rank. Unity or Umoja is constant. We light the Black candle and do not let anyone blow it out.

During the *praise break*, the evening I attended, the two artists, Europa Grace and Bronte Velez, share a meal- greens, sweet potato, corn bread, legumes, and then watch each other sleep as the other person shares poetry, recorded beats and other thoughts. It is lyrical and lovely. Together, taken with *mouth/fullness*, this evening's "praise break" is part of a larger meditation on faith and hope and recovery — Blackness as refuge and shame.

Here in this *mouth/full* moment; *She-Verse* Moment — we are beauty, we are power, we are all there is and all that matter. Blackness is where it's at. It always has been where it's at, but to have the validation within a public space means there are witnesses and perhaps a

collective shift and rememory of this moment is a tangible takeaway.

Perhaps those that are not Black, those who were not VIP will remember the feeling of being outside, not belonging and make a visceral performative change when roles are flipped back and the lone or a lone Black person clings to a tangible periphery. Will these white hands reach out and grab that of the person about to fall? Will these hands notice, someone is missing?

However, this is not the point. The point is whether these other patrons get it or not, remember the experience or not, is not a Black problem. It is not our job to take care of the white people, to worry if they get it or what they get. We are just to bask in Blackness and enjoy the privilege of Black space: Its beauty, its peace, its love.

As the collective dances this African Diaspora with Cherie Hill; Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch we are lifted, baptized, anointed, made holy the way Wayne Corbett used to do when he performed. We are holy; however the white gaze like smog often makes our legacy, our greatness difficult to see. Sometimes we just need to get away. Step aside, take the day off, get with other Black folks and witness as participants great art created by and for people like us — and so . . .

We are called out- “If you are Black or an African identified come with me” Gabriel says and we look at each other those who self-select, check the box: Blackness. Hum, I hope being Black is a good thing, we hope; we wonder.

Trusting the process is also having faith. When Gabriel takes the lead, I have the feeling he is going to take good care of those of us who are following him. I am not disappointed.

Thursday, Dec. 12 is pay-what-you-can. It is also a special tour for the visually impaired or those who want to experience such a tour at 7 p.m. The show begins at 7:45 p.m. to 9 p.m. at 80 Turk in San Francisco (near Powell Street BART).

Visit the CounterPulse website for all the details and to see what artists will be performing during the “Praise Break” in mouth/full. The Praise Break features a new artist(s) each evening. Mouth/Full is a continuation of a query, the two choreographers explored first in mouth/full of Seeds at the National Queer Arts Festival. How did Africans come to America? They are looking at creating a third part to this query. Listen to Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch in a recent interview on [Wanda’s Picks Radio Show Dec. 11.](#)

Listen to Cherie Hill and Chibueze Crouch in another conversation a week ago: <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/wandas-picks/2019/12/04/wandas-picks-radio-show>

Like so many seeds we crossed land and oceans and planted ourselves in these new worlds. Now that we are here how has this experience changed us and how do we remain the same? What happens when seeds from a distant land are planted in new soil?

Faith and religion are two spaces that African Diaspora still occupy- the names might have changed, but the spirit remains. In *mouth/full*, Christian and Crouch's characters struggle visibly with the crosses they've been carrying and through story and movement we learn the cost of bondage and the price of freedom. This is not a Harriet Tubman story, and yet it is a Harriet Tubman story. It is also the story of Araminta "Minty" Ross, the girl who trusted her dreams. A woman who feared no man.