

BLACKNESS

through movement Five Colleges dance teacher creates online series of classes

Celebrating

By STEVE PFARRER

Staff Writer

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck full force back in March, Shakia Johnson, a Five College instructor in African Diasporic Dance based at Mount Holyoke College, found herself in the same chaotic place so many other area teachers did: having to pivot immediately to begin teaching her students online after schools and colleges were abruptly closed.

“It was crazy,” Johnson said in a recent call from her home in Springfield. “There was so much to do so fast.” Getting fully up to speed for teaching online, she notes, required a complicated juggling act of using “an iPad, a laptop, Bluetooth and a camera.”

And teaching a movement-based activity like dance — one that’s almost always based on people interacting physically — online offered a whole separate level of challenge, Johnson says.

But Johnson, who has taught dance and choreography in a number of settings over the years, including Jacob’s Pillow and the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School, has been inspired by the experience to go even further. Since early May, she has overseen an additional online project that has brought in multiple Black dance teachers to lead workshops for her Black students, with the workshops continuing this summer.

And Johnson’s project, called “Black Beauty Dance,” has unfolded against the backdrop of a national uproar, including weeks of protests, spurred by the killing of a number of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police. She said she had reached out to her Black students to see how they were dealing with that grim news and the isolation imposed by the pandemic.

“I sent out an email saying ‘Hope you’re all hanging in there, and what are you missing?’” said Johnson. “And [students] were saying, ‘We’d really like to see each other. Let’s have a Zoom meeting, just to have a safe space where we can talk about what we’re all feeling.’” These students, Johnson adds, had been part of the dance work she had been doing for her own MFA thesis performance (through a low-residency program at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania), in which Johnson had been using dance to examine issues of

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OLIVIA LOWE

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Five Colleges dance instructor Shakia Johnson has created an online series of workshops this summer, “Black Beauty Dance,” for a core group of Black students.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAKIA JOHNSON



Shakia Johnson is shown outside Kendall Sports & Dance Complex at Mount Holyoke College.

STAFF PHOTO/JERREY ROBERTS

Shakia Johnson creates online series of classes

FROM B1

inequality, social and racial injustice, social dances, and Black women pioneers. Johnson said that gave her a particular affinity with the students — and speaking with them via Zoom prompted her to develop her new project.

Her students, she said, “also said they wanted to be able to move together as well as talk.”

For the Black Beauty project, Johnson has led a number of the workshops and lectures/ Q& As, and she also has enlisted numerous other Black teachers to lead these virtual sessions, such as Christal Brown, a choreographer and dancer who teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont, and Gesel Mason, a choreographer and dancer with the University of Texas at Austin. The classes, with around 15 students, also have covered dance forms not usually available in college settings, such as vernacular jazz, waacking, and Afrobeat.

Johnson said some teachers have led classes for free, as she has, but to pay some of the contributors, she has dipped into her own savings to the tune of about \$750. Mount Holyoke College gave her \$500, she added, but she also has started a GoFundMe campaign to keep the classes — now also available to students outside the

Five College Area — going through summer, five days a week. The goal is to raise \$8,000, and as of Aug. 5, nearly \$6,680 had been tallied.

Olivia Lowe, a Mount Holyoke College dance student from New Jersey, told the Gazette the workshops have given her “profound joy” and a rich sense of community. “This is an opportunity that I have not had in the Five College dance departments,” she wrote in an email. “Studying techniques rooted in Blackness — from Vernacular Jazz to Old Way Vogue — with Black Beauty has felt liberating, challenging, and empowering by enabling me to physically embrace my history.”

On the GoFundMe page, a number of students also offer video testimonials on what Black Beauty Dance has meant to them. Zaria Johnson, from Spelman College in Georgia, says the classes have “helped me fall in love with dance again and given me a distraction from all the chaos around me.”

Shakia Johnson says the program has meant “a lot of administrative work, just setting everything up,” as well as a lot of creative thinking on how to teach dance online (one focus has been getting students to tailor their movements to the size of the space they practice in). She’s also knee-deep in preparing to teach her fall Five College

classes, some of which will be online and others in person, but with social distancing.

Johnson is also about to get married, she said with a laugh. “It seems like there’s always something to do.”

Steve Pfarrer can be reached at spfarrer@gazettenet.com. More information on Shakia Johnson and Black Beauty Dance can be found at gofundme.com/f/black-beautydance-work-shop-series.



A screen shot from a Zoom session with Shakia Johnson and some of the students who are part of Black Beauty Dance.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SHAKIA JOHNSON