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McKinney's "HaMapah" explores heritage through dance

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Last Saturday, Adam McKinney performed "HaMapah," a thought-provoking blend of multi-media dance and storytelling, in Jewett Auditorium. Choreographed by McKinney and directed by Daniel Banks, "HaMapah" tells the story of McKinney's exploration and acceptance of his African, American and Jewish heritages. McKinney, a classically trained dancer and choreographer, aroused the audience's interest and sympathy with carefully crafted sequences of dance, video clips, photographs, music and narration. The performance was followed by a discussion and Q&A session in which audience members were invited to reflect on the performance and share stories of their own families and heritages.

The performance was co-sponsored by the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Greater Boston, Hillel, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and Harambee House (as a Black History Month event), and attracted a diverse audience of Wellesley students, local residents, JCC members and longtime patrons of McKinney and Banks. Judging by the audience's responsiveness in the discussion session of the program, "HaMapah" spoke to the audience members' own searches for identity. McKinney's sparse use of on-stage props and rich, meaningful projected images and music intensified the emotional effect of his physical movements and narration. The projection of words (including "Brown," "Brother," "North," "Mom's Mom," "Homme" and "Croon") onto the screen divided the performance into conceptual themes that McKinney explored more completely through dance, song and multimedia. McKinney's creative interpretation of these themes and his family stories effectively demonstrated his ability to personalize and reflect on his multiculturalism.

McKinney conveyed an impressively wide range of emotions, from grief to elation, through skillful dancing and facial expressions. The poeticism of his narration was similarly captivating and moving. This poetic feel was evident in one line in particular "I am the map, the quilt, the tablecloth of those who have come before me. I am the sum total of all my ancestors." His use of fabric extended beyond the realm of metaphors; a square piece of cloth served faithfully as a prop. The cloth was not only symbolic overall of McKinney's role as "the map, the quilt, the tablecloth," but was also easily transformed into various objects depending on the theme. McKinney managed to press the cloth into service as an umbilical cord, a noose, a scarf and a protective garment throughout his performance. Near the end of "HaMapah," McKinney held up the cloth as a projection screen for a video clip of a loving interaction between his white mother and African-American father. He closed the performance rather poignantly by wrapping the cloth around himself, thus embracing and being embraced by his cultural heritage.

There were also moments, particularly when McKinney omitted narration and explanation, that were confusing and less effective. "HaMapah" began with a jarring sequence of indecipherable flashes of family photos that left the audience puzzled and disoriented. During the discussion period, McKinney explained that he purposely gave the audience only glimpses of the photos to simulate the experience of curiosity and inevitable loss of information that goes along with uncovering one's family history. Explaining this theory during the photo sequence would have enriched the audience's experience of the show. Overall, McKinney abstracted his journey of familial- and self-discovery elegantly into a beautiful work of art, but more narration and anecdotes would have been welcome.

The discussion period and Q&A were an excellent way to end the evening. By inviting audience members to share their own stories of self-discovery and acceptance, McKinney and Banks successfully nurtured a strong sense of community and support. As McKinney said during the discussion, "The role of art for me is to bring people together to notice each other and to love." "HaMapah" was an engaging, visually attractive and emotionally evocative performance piece that was executed passionately and precisely. Based on the impressive turnout Saturday night, quality dance performances like "HaMapah" appeal to many.