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Maija García brings the Afro-Caribbean diaspora to life through “Jazz Island”

By Sophia Angelica

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The visionary and innovative Cuban-American dancer, director, and creator Maija García is widely recognized for her outstanding and versatile multidisciplinary career in theater, film, television, music, and dance, among other areas.

Recently appointed Director of the Capri Theater in Minneapolis, García has collaborated with legendary figures such as Spike Lee and Bill T. Jones on acclaimed productions, including “Blackkklansman”, “CHI-RAQ”, Netflix’s “She’s Gotta Have It”, and the Tony Award-winning musical “FELA!”, presented on Broadway and

internationally.

With a focus on bringing history and culture to life through his projects, García now presents “Jazz Island”, his first work as part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater tour, which will arrive at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center from May 8 to 10.

Through this piece, she pays homage to the Trinidadian artist Geoffrey Holder, bringing to dance the narrative of his book of Caribbean folktales, “Black Gods, Green Islands.” With an original score by Etienne Charles, García explores themes such as spirituality, ancestral heritage, and the power of love in the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, through the story of Erzulie, the Afro-Haitian goddess of love.

In an exclusive interview with Impacto Latino, García shared more details about his artistic evolution and his most recent project, “Jazz Island”.

What first drew you to the artistic world?

-I grew up with a mother who wanted to share all the options in the world with me. So, she brought me to the theater, the orchestra, and introduced me to different activities. I was very active as a child.

I did gymnastics and started dancing when I was about eight. I didn't like classical ballet at all. But once I discovered jazz, when I heard the music and saw the style of the personalities moving, I completely fell in love. I studied classical ballet and jazz, and I did everything I could to learn. Then, I joined a dance company at the same time I started university. I always worked as a performer while pursuing my degree in international relations.

What lessons from working with incredible creatives do you still carry with you today in your own process?

-First and foremost, it inspires me. When you work with a master like yourself, you learn that it's not just about talent, but also dedication and discipline. Working with Spike Lee, for example, he was always the first to arrive because he wanted to focus on his work. Like what I see in Alvin Ailey's dancers, each one has expert discipline. It's not a competition. It's an internal drive.



Your new work, “Jazz Island,” is inspired by Afro-Caribbean culture and the music of Etienne Charles. How did this idea come about?

- I always wanted to pay homage to Geoffrey Holder and Carmen de Lavallade. Carmen was an inspiration to me, a muse who always taught me dignity and elegance as a woman of color in the world.

Geoffrey Holder became a costume designer, a director, a professional film actor, and a wonderful dancer. His ideas were grand and imaginative. So, both of them inspired me, and with Carmen approaching her 90th birthday, I wanted to pay tribute to her before she passed away.



When I was invited to do something with Alvin Ailey, the first thing I did was call Etienne Charles because I wanted to collaborate with him. Etienne is from Trinidad, the same island as Geoffrey, and he was even a mentor to Etienne. He introduced me to a book called "Black Gods, Green Islands" by Geoffrey Holder. I already had a very strong image in my mind, in my heart, of what I wanted to do. Once I read the book, the last story began with that same image.

It's a story of resilience and the struggle for love. As a gift to humanity, I wanted to bring this story to life, because with everything that's happening in our world, I believe that love is what unites us.

In "Jazz Island," spirituality and narrative are very present. How do you integrate these elements?

-I wanted to study the story with the dancers and invite them to work in a different way. I wanted them to come as actors and take risks in creating characters. So, we had to study the text, and we talked about the spirituality that exists within it. Geoffrey Holder brought his Afro-Caribbean stories from the island of Trinidad, but also from all the islands. He makes us think about where the forces of nature come from and how we can use those forces in our lives.

In the stories that have been told for generations, from their origins in Africa, which African people brought to the Caribbean, spirituality is very important. I wanted to celebrate that culture through this piece.

You've just taken over as Director of the Capri Theater. What kind of space would you like to create there?

At Capri, we do theater, dance, poetry, film, and visual arts. We have a gallery, very different spaces. We're dedicated to training and educating the next generation, children and young people.

We are preparing teenagers for life through art, because in art, we learn to connect, express ourselves, find our identity, and how to collaborate and work in a group. We are creating a community of people who contribute their best.



What I'm doing at the Capri is activating the space with artists and events. It's a theater that's been around for a hundred years. It has a history, and we have to celebrate the culture of the place and continue the practice of artistic innovation and invention.