

PREVIEW

***Reform* Shouts Out Injustice**

Tap Dance-Infused Piece Examines Criminal Justice Inequities

By Lisa Traiger



Baakari Wilder started tap lessons as a three-year-old at the Deerfield Run Community Center in Laurel. He still remembers his teacher was Miss Betty. After a brief hiatus when the other boy in the class quit, he followed his sister back to class and pretty much stayed. He attended the performing arts magnet programs at Thomas G. Pullen Creative and Performing Arts Academy and Suitland High School in Prince Georges County, Md., majoring in theater. By 18, Wilder was performing on Broadway in the groundbreaking meditation on race and dance in America, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* (1995). When its co-creator and star, former *Tap Dance Kid* Savion Glover, left the show, Wilder stepped into the lead role. These days, Baakari teaches, acts and dances in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., region. His nine-year-old son, Ki, studies dance at Pullen. Wilder said, "We're working on the 'Shim Sham.' So, we do spend a little bit of time with the wood."

This weekend at Dance Place, Wilder reunites with some of his *Noise/Funk* hoofers – Omar Edwards, Joseph Webb, Tai

DuCATi, and Dougie Baldeo – in *Reform: Racial Disparities in American Criminal Justice*, a new work that examines the inequities in the criminal justice and prison system for African-American men. Conceived by Kerri Edge, a dancer, educator, producer and activist across performance genres, and directed by Wilder, the dance-theater piece digs deep into the Civil War and Reconstruction and covers a broad swath of American history. With words and music culled from the likes of James Baldwin, Nina Simone, Mahalia Jackson, Tupac, Yusef Salaam, Maya Angelou and Malcolm X, *Reform* traces ingrained racial inequities in the current system – and in our nation at large.

Reform has its Washington, D.C., premiere this Saturday and Sunday, November 23-24, at Dance Place. For more information and tickets, visit [Dance Place](#).

Recently, Baakari took some time to discuss *Reform* with arts journalist Lisa Traiger, director of the D.C. Dance Journalism Project.

D.C. Dance Journalism Project: Will you share with us how *Reform* began.

Baakari Wilder: A long-time friend, Kerri Edge, came up with this brilliant idea about looking at the whole criminal justice system starting with the history of how black men wound up in the prison system in the first place. The play really depicts the pain of the loss of a family, of being taken away and sent to prison, and it also talks about more recent events [like the Central Park 5], the gentlemen who were

wrongly incarcerated in Central Park. We focus on African American men in the prison system – some wrongly accused, some in there for a length of time just because of how the laws are set up.

It's all told by way of tap dance and monologue and music and projections that help educate and move the story along. With the dancers there is a vocalist and a team of young dancers who highlight our main dancers.

D.J.P.: What do you want audiences to take away from *Reform*?



B.W.: Well, the title *Reform* really just explains the disparities of the African-American man in the criminal justice system. The piece is about African-American men's experiences inside of the criminal justice system. *Reform* being the need to change the harsh living experiences in the criminal justice system and some of the laws that keep African-American men down and that bring them into the system and keep them there unjustly.

D.J.P.: Why and how is dance the right medium to tell this story?

B.W.: As an artist, for me dance is just one of the tools of expression. I feel all art forms are connected. To me that expression and the passion behind the script lies inside of the music and sound and movement. I feel that they're equal. In this piece we go from words – monologue – to what I think the dance does best – take us even deeper after all the words are said. For example, the frustration comes from the heart, the heart with no words. The next step is movement, dance, some type of total exertion. To me the dance has always been a form to express how I feel about the world, about life. As artists, we're capable of translating that for others to grasp on a level of different than speaking.

Music does that too. And [as tap dancers], we're musicians. We're just trying to talk about this heavy topic ... using this American art form is rooted in the African-American tradition. This particular art form, this American art form has an African past. And our [African-American] genius has been depicted in so many different ways: copied and stolen and applauded, and at the same time regarded as not even human. *Reform* asks, how much has that changed today?

D.J.P.: This is a bit of reunion for you and your colleagues from *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*.



B.W.: We had a reunion concert called *Lotus* at The Kennedy Center two years ago. I love working with my colleagues because to me they're the elite. As dancers, they're the ones who are carrying on tradition with the dance. They're the ones who are making certain that the legends are honored – those who came before us: Jimmy Slyde, Buster Brown, Eddie Brown, Lon Chaney, Harold Cromer, Gregory Hines, are some of the legends we worked with. We were fortunate enough to be around them in the past to have their jewels inside of us and to build in very distinctive, different ways. We're not the same dancers, but we have same background and that's how the legends were; they all had something to offer. Just to be on the same stage with them makes me a better dancer.

D.J.P.: Any final thoughts you wish to share about *Reform*?

B.W.: I'm just attempting to shout an injustice.

***Reform: Racial Disparities in American Criminal Justice* by Kerri Edge, directed by and featuring Baakari Wilder, November 23 at 8:00 p.m., November 24 at 4:00 p.m. Dance Place, 3225 8th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. Tickets: \$15-\$30. Call (202) 269-1600 or visit Dance Place [here](#).**

Photos: Baakari Wilder, top and center, photos by Michel Leroy
New York cast of *Reform*, bottom, courtesy Kerri Edge