

WHEN BLACK CHOREOGRAPHERS MATTER

by Jennifer Fisher

Nearly 60 years ago, legendary choreographer Donald McKayle, who died on April 6, 2018, made a dance about men in chains who dreamed of freedom. The men in *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* were imprisoned—we don't know why or how—or else they represent a kind of cage we all lived in when injustice prevails. Since then, *Rainbow* has been hailed as a masterwork of modern dance and a powerful political statement. McKayle spent a lifetime providing dance for the concert stage, Broadway and Hollywood, dancing with luminaries from Martha Graham to Diana Ross. He was, not surprisingly, declared one of this nation's first 100 Dance Treasures by the Dance Heritage Coalition.

In January of 2018, when *Rainbow* was performed in Los Angeles on a program at the conference of the International Black Dance Association, the iconic line up of seven dancers, with arms linked in rhythmic solidarity, had barely made their way onto the stage when wild applause broke out. To the driving melody of a work song, the men's struggle became a focal point of human dignity and solidarity, speaking eloquently about the universal longing for liberty and the specific plight of black and Latino men who might have been arrested and tried in a racialized atmosphere.

Sound familiar? *Rainbow's* power as commentary seems as relevant now as it was in mid-century America when it was made. Has dance change any hearts and minds over the years? Scholar Rebekah Kowall thinks it has that potential. She hailed McKayle's seminal work as an artistic embodiment of sit-ins and marches during the Civil Rights era. His choreography "spared no moral indignation in its presentation not only of the results of a broken judicial and penal system," she wrote, "but also of the adoption of human strategies to transcend and even to protest it." Making his way into a largely white modern dance world of the 1950s, McKayle brought with him his cultural specificity (his childhood playground chants in Harlem became *Games*, a complex dance of fun and lurking danger), but he also made dances with the universal themes of jubilation and human longing.

McKayle also made a dance to a Langston Hughes poem ("I've known rivers...") and a powerful solo to Roberta Flack singing about why there are no black angels (*Angelitos Negros*). In recent years, as an emeritus professor at University of California, Irvine, where he was my colleague, he made a dance about the plight of migrant farm workers (*Uprooted*) and just last year, one inspired by the refugee crisis in Syria (*Crossing the Rubicon*). As surely as a body out of place at the front of the bus, McKayle continued to challenge theatre-goers to see injustice, to see his community as a rich one, and to understand commonality and nobility on the level of the human body. He never gave up on the power of art to win hearts and minds.

In a nation marked by the brutality of past and present racial inequities, can dancing really matter? When McKayle was a young dancer, he encountered signs at Broadway auditions that said, "No Negroes needed today," yet he lived to find out just how much he was needed as an elder who still watched the news. In an interview with me in February, he spoke about how much he admired the embodied protests of Colin Kaepernick, the NFL hopeful who caused such controversy simply by kneeling during the national anthem to call attention to injustice. He

noticed how other players, by linking their arms in solidarity at other games resembled the men in *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*. These were *choreographies* of protest—mild-mannered and respectful, but powerful. What could be more respectful than kneeling? It's what the devout do in prayer, it's how we honor those above us or sink in reverence to higher powers. Unlike McKayle's dances, the choreography of football players was not interpreted and written about by dance critics, who are trained to find the meaning in historical context.

Freedom and protest have always been compatible in democratic countries. The United States is the nation that once fell into Jim Crow inequities, but it's also the place where Donald McKayle, child of Jamaican immigrants, grew up to make us all think about the value of the human spirit and how it can be embodied powerfully for positive good in dance.