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# Pointed Choreography, Rooted in South Africa

By ROSLYN SULCAS

The South African choreographer Robyn Orlin has a long history of annoying people, but from talking to her, you would never know it. She is candid to a fault, thoughtful and rather adorably scattered. Her e-mails are filled with exclamation marks and signed with x's, denoting kisses. And yet Ms. Orlin, 55, has long been one of her country's most provocative artists, a white woman from the comfortable Johannesburg suburbs fearlessly confronting the truths and myths of a complex political and social history.

She has a serious reputation in Europe, particularly in France, where she has created a work for the Paris Opera Ballet and been awarded the National Order of Merit. But her work has rarely been seen in the United States, so the appearance of her recent piece, "Walking next to our shoes ... Intoxicated by strawberries and cream ... We enter continents without knocking. ...," at Montclair State University through Feb. 20, is an occasion.

Ms. Orlin has made a specialty of the title as essay, like the 1999 "Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other. ...," "My titles are long, but they allow the public to have an idea of all the elements I'm dealing with," Ms. Orlin said by phone from Berlin, where she lives with her husband ("I'm on my third"), the South African filmmaker Oliver Schmitz, and their 7-year-old daughter, Ruby Sunshine.

"In Zulu, 'walking next to our shoes' means being poor," Ms. Orlin explained. "Intoxicated by strawberries and cream' refers to being in love and to the colors of symbols for AIDS. 'We enter continents without knocking' is talking about xenophobia and emigration."

As her description makes clear, Ms. Orlin's work is closely concerned with South Africa, despite her European base. (She maintains an office in Johannesburg.) From her first solo in 1976, she has used art as political activism, to comment on the hypocrisies, incongruities and cruelties of life in South Africa, first under apart-

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heid, then as a new democracy.

Her early audiences — used to a diet of traditional ballet — had little exposure to contemporary dance, let alone the kind of absurdist, provocative pieces that Ms. Orlin was creating. Reactions were mostly hostile.

"The first piece I saw, in the early '80s, was just Robyn sitting on a chair, pulling pink ballet ribbons out of her chest," said Adrienne Sichel, the most prominent South African dance writer. "It was typical of the way she alienated and annoyed the conventional dance audience. People would just walk out."

There is little in Ms. Orlin's background to suggest this penchant for subversion, or the intense political activism that occupied her at an early age. She grew up in an all-white, middle-class neighborhood in a dance-focused family; her mother was a former professional dancer, her aunt a contemporary-dance teacher. After studying at the London School of Contemporary Dance, she returned to South Africa in 1983 and decided, she said, "to go into the townships and learn about African dance and start working."

Together with the choreographer and teacher Sylvia Glasser, she started a dance department at the Federated Union of Black Artists and taught extensively in the townships. Ms. Orlin also created her own work, mainly in Johannesburg at the Market Theater, an island of racial equality and creative ferment during the apartheid years.

There, Ms. Orlin established a signature style, one that has close affinities with European dance theater — her debt to Pina Bausch is often clear — in its absurdist drama, while remaining linked to her own culture.

Ms. Orlin's big breakthrough came in 1999 with "Daddy," which tackled the incongruities of the newly democratic South Africa. (A memorable image has a black dancer in a white tutu sieving flour over herself as Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" plays.) Her next major work, "We must eat our suckers with the wrappers on ...," specifically addressed the issue of AIDS in South Africa.

It's a theme that Ms. Orlin takes up again in "Walking next

to our shoes," in which she uses the group Phuma Love Minus, performing isicathamiya (issikAT-ah-mee-ya) — a traditional, all-male Zulu form of a capella song and movement. She also uses an opera singer (Ann Masina), two dancers and a "swanker" (Vusumuzi Kunene), as men who compete in highly stylized best-dressed competitions are called.

"I've always been very interested in urbanized dance, and I think, to a large extent, this piece is a kind of homage," Ms. Orlin said. "I just fell in love with the way they sang and moved. There is such a lot of humor and dignity there."

Ms. Orlin is sometimes accused by reviewers of a lack of subtlety, but it's an aspect of her work that she willingly acknowledges.

"The incredible thing about South Africans is that we really have a sense of humor about ourselves on both sides of the color bar," she said. "We're not politically correct, and everything is in your face. A bit like my work."



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Robyn Orlin, whose work is being performed at Montclair State.