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Dance troupe Afro Mosaic Soul will be one of the groups performing this weekend at African Dance/Brooklyn Style, the inaugural event of Black Brooklyn Renaissance, held by the Brooklyn Arts Council.

Photo courtesy of the Brooklyn Arts Council

By Sarah Tobol
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BROOKLYN — “There’s nothing quite like dance,” says Dr. Kay Turner, Folk Arts director for the Brooklyn Arts Council (BAC) —which is why she chose the medium to kick-off an exciting year of programming called Black Brooklyn Renaissance.

During her tenure with the BAC, she has worked with many black artists who have come from many different places, but make Brooklyn their home. As “one of the central black communities in the country,” she thought, “it really hasn’t been much of a center [for black culture] as I think it could be.”

So Turner decided to highlight the rich black culture of Brooklyn, using the Harlem Renaissance as a “counterpoint.” The resulting year of programming is called Black Brooklyn Renaissance, and it takes a look at black culture over the past five decades — from the Civil Rights Movement to the present — through dance, music and the written word.

“We’ve had a renaissance in Brooklyn, [but] it’s not over yet, it’s a living thing,” Turner said. “The significant black population is continually infused with incoming immigration ... Brooklyn has got a lot going on for it in terms of black culture.”

With Black Brooklyn Renaissance, “rather than separating the community into constituent parts, it’s an attempt to look at black culture and black arts as a whole,” she explained.

The inaugural event, African Dance/Brooklyn Style will take place this Sunday, Feb. 28, at the Walt Whitman Theater at the Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts. The event will bring folk, modern and postmodern dancers and dance troupes to the same stage — exploring the evolution of black culture through dance. All will draw inspiration from African dance.

“It’s going to be extremely celebratory and lively,” said Sara DeRose, BAC spokesperson. She went on to say that there will be at least 10 individual dancers or dance troupes, including Baraka de Soleil, Camille A. Brown, Afro-Panamanian dance troupe Conjunto Nuevo Milenio, Afro-Brooklyn Jumbies and Asase Yaa.

“They all have interesting ways of showing or interpreting their African roots,” DeRose noted.

“The reason I chose African dance is it’s probably the most obvious expressive form that has taken root in Brooklyn,” Turner said. “There’s nothing quite like dance.”

Sunday’s lineup will feature up-and-coming young dancers juxtaposed with traditional African dancers. The event will be followed up by a symposium on Wednesday, March 3 “to investigate [African Dance] in more depth,” said Turner. The panel will be moderated by dance historian Dr. Angela Fatou Gittens.

‘Hip Hop Hybrids of Brooklyn’

Further programming for Black Brooklyn Renaissance will include events held by BAC, but will also encompass relevant events held by other organizations, DeRose explained. In April, BAC will present “Hip Hop Hybrids of Brooklyn,” a dance and music showcase spotlighting hip hop artists. The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music and Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium will hold a tribute to Brooklyn jazz composer Cal Massey, also in April.

BAC will screen a documentary in May as part of its Scene: Brooklyn, Independent Film and Media Arts series, called “Making Do the Right Thing,” about Spike Lee’s film shot in Bedford-Stuyvesant. BAC will also support BAM during DanceAfrica.

“Our goal is to have everything be free or affordable,” said DeRose.

In addition to the programming, BAC will conduct an oral history project, collecting stories from the public and setting up an archive on its web site, DeRose added.

“There’s an enormous influence of black culture in our entire borough,” she continued. “It’s the perfect place to celebrate and explore the understanding and appreciation of black culture and black arts.”

“I don’t think the world at large knows how much has come out of Brooklyn and how much could come out of Brooklyn,” Turner said.

BAC has partnered with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation for Black Brooklyn Renaissance. For a list of spring programming, visit www.brooklynartscouncil.org.

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