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Gods of Florida: Mother

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Two life-changing events in 2011 led to the creation of the project, Gods of Florida, the first in a series of dance/film collaborations focusing on the forces of nature that guide and guard Florida—in a very real sense, the natural forces that keep the state, and us, alive.

The first event was a dance class I took in coastal North Carolina, an Afro-Brazilian dance class hosted by an extraordinary company from Los Angeles called Viver Brasil. At the end of the class, the artistic director announced that the company had a travel immersion program to Bahia, Brazil to study indigenous dance and Candomblé, the local religion rooted in African deities and beliefs. I was immediately drawn to this

program, but the timing wasn't right.

The second event happened at the end of the same year. I quit my job in North Carolina, sold almost all of my possessions, and moved to south Florida to begin a new life guiding eco-tours in the Everglades. Every time I visited Florida, the place called to me. The Florida wet speaks to me deep in my bones, and it is an old, familiar call, something primal and ancestral. Finally, I ran to the Everglades, and I found my spiritual home there. When I stand in the middle of a cypress dome during the wet season, I feel alive and eternal, connected to the earth, to my body, to my spirit, to *the Spirit* that moves and breathes through all things. These sensations are the ideal circumstances for a dancer/choreographer. I needed to communicate what I felt; I didn't yet know how.

In August 2012, I took the cultural immersion trip to Brazil with Viver Brasil, and there the Gods of Florida dance project clicked. In Bahia we took intensive classes in Yoruba songs to the Orixás, the Candomblé deities representing the forces of nature, life, and death. Candomblé is akin to Santería of Cuba or of West African Vodun, brought as it was to Brazil by African slaves for the Portuguese. After song class, we took three hours of dance. My studies in Brazil began to give me a language and a way of moving that inspired and articulated what I so deeply felt about natural Florida.

It was during one of our song classes that I met Nanà, the oldest of the Orixás, the grandmother, the spirit of the swamp, of ooze, of the beginning of life. She is also the force that carries the dead bodies home. The moment our teacher began singing for Nanà, I saw the Everglades and I started to cry—out of a deep sense of recognition—and I knew I would create a dance for Nanà, a dance that would honor the spirit of the

Everglades and our connection to it as her children.

I returned to south Florida, and after I spoke about the profound experience in Brazil, my friend and filmmaker Rick Cruz took me to what he called “the grandmother cypress” in the Fakahatchee Strand. He estimates her to be around 800 years old. She is hollow, so was spared when the cypress loggers cleared out that swath of Fakahatchee during the logging boom of the 1940’s and 1950’s. They deemed her worthless. When I saw this ancient tree, I felt the same spiritual and emotional connection I had during the Nanà song class in Brazil. It now seemed logical that this giant cypress would be home to the great swamp goddess.

GODS OF FLORIDA: MOTHER was born. As an artist, I do not know how else to convey the vital importance of re-apprehending what we really are in regards to sustainability: we aren’t in nature, we aren’t connected to nature, we don’t “manage” nature. We *are*

nature. We are the living Science, the living Spirit, and only an infinitesimal part of the power of both.

GODS OF FLORIDA: MOTHER premiered at Cucalorus International Film Festival in Wilmington, North Carolina, on November 13, 2013. The performance featured a solo dancer as the manifestation of the Divine Feminine energy of Mother Earth, the nurturing and formidable Grandmother, the Maker. The dance, inspired by Afro-Brazilian ceremonial dances of the Orixás, interprets these traditional earthy, African tribal movements through the natural forces of the Everglades. The raw footage Rick Cruz captured during our trips to the Fakahatchee was projected behind the dancer: the ancient cypress trees, wet season rainstorms, wild animals, birth, decay, and the fecundity of plant life. My purpose was to create a homage to the Orixás dance that could honor the spirit of the Everglades, and in the end MOTHER emerged as collaboration

between film and dance. The two videos that accompany this introduction are meant to exemplify both the performance and process of GODS OF FLORIDA: MOTHER. "Gods 1" shows the November 2013 evening's performance, filmed on a tripod camcorder for the purpose of a "choreographer's reel." "Gods 2" is an edited version of Rick Cruz's raw footage created by *JFS*.