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Carmen de Lavallade, above, and Bebe Miller, right in her 1989 piece "Rain," have solos — along with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Germaine Acogny and Dianne McIntyre — in "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance," at 651 Arts in Brooklyn.

Autumnal Choreographers in Full Bloom

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

THE choreographers Bebe Miller and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar formed their troupes, the Bebe Miller Company and Urban Bush Women, in the mid-1980s and have been honing their voices for many years. It shows; theirs is work to savor.

Lately, though, Georgiana Pickett, executive director of the Brooklyn presenter 651 Arts, has been mourning the increasingly rare appearances of the two women at their troupes' shows, as well as public performances by other midcareer artists. "How could we provide context for what their bodies have to say?" she wondered. "How could we provide an exciting, challenging and safe environment for that?"

Mission accomplished: On Saturday, 651 Arts, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary as a supporter of contemporary performing arts rooted in the African diaspora, will present "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance," featuring solos by Ms. Miller, Ms. Zollar, Germaine Acogny, Carmen de Lavallade and Dianne McIntyre.

"I'm old," Ms. Miller exclaimed, laughing, when asked about her reaction to the invitation. (She will reprise her 1989 work "Rain.") Ms. Miller, 58, added that she was thrilled to be in such company. "The idea of continuity in this field — and for women in particular, and for black women in particular — is, I feel, what the point is. It's less about me but more about what this span of time really represents."

Their collective span of experience is immense. Ms. de Lavallade, who declined to give her age, made her debut in 1950 with Lester Horton's modern dance troupe and had a long association with Alvin Ailey. She has worked with a wide range of artists in opera, ballet, theater and Hollywood. Ms. McIntyre, 62, who has had a decades-long collaboration with the multi-instrumentalist Olu Dara (who has composed the music for her new solo), ran a Harlem studio in the 1970s and '80s that served as a hub for African-American artists interested in experimentation, including Ms. Zollar, now 58. And Ms. Acogny, 65, who is Senegalese and French, established her first dance studio in Dakar in 1968, and now runs Compagnie Jant-Bi, an all-male troupe based in Senegal and known for its



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international collaborations.

Ms. Pickett said she felt strongly about including an African choreographer but worried she could not afford one. In addition to the granting of visas, still a hurdle after the Sept. 11 attacks, the presentation of international work is time-intensive and costly; African governments, unlike their European counterparts, infrequently subsidize tours. As public and private financing has continued to contract in the United States, and as promised donations have evaporated because of shrinking endowments, organizations like 651 Arts are struggling.

"One of the tenets that 651 is built on," Ms. Pickett said, "is that black artists are

important contributors to contemporary culture. It's not like black people just have these innate talents that make us great dancers or musicians, and black folks come to these things because of just natural tendencies. We use the same level of creativity and rigor and discipline and training, and create new culture, new work, new thinking and new art."

Ms. Acogny, often called the mother of contemporary African dance, embodies that statement — and offered to participate as a gift to Ms. Pickett and 651 Arts. "I wanted to prove to myself where I was standing with my own dance but also in regards to the United States and to the African-American community," Ms. Acogny,

who will perform a new solo, wrote in an e-mail message. "We need to create and develop more interaction and collaboration with the African diaspora all over the world and particularly with the U.S.A."

She added that she sometimes felt trapped by people's "vague, exotic and at times patronizing" expectations toward African dance. Several of the other women expressed similar frustrations.

"When I was first doing my work, and my company was all black dancers and musicians, there were comments on both sides," Ms. McIntyre said of her improvisational work in the 1970s.

She said those comments ranged from a black academic, who asked why she didn't work with popular music that would be accessible to people, to some whites, who applied "the black label" to her experimentation, refusing to view it in the wider context of early postmodern dance. Ms. McIntyre related these stories during a conference call with Ms. Zollar, who laughed wearily and said, "I hear you."

Given this lack of understanding, the sustained work of 651 Arts, which was founded in 1988 by Mikki Shepard and Leonard Goines, has been particularly important.

"Knowing there was a place that was really looking at African-American work, and work from the African diaspora, in a serious and committed way," has been a great comfort, said Ms. Zollar, who will perform a new solo related to her company's recent stints in New Orleans. "I know there will be an audience that has both an internal and an external perspective. That's really, really important, and I think that doesn't really exist very much."

Both Ms. Pickett and Ms. Shepard said that while diversity in the performing arts still has a way to go, the box of expectations placed on minority performers has eased. Some of that is because of the work of women like these five, who pushed against those expectations or ignored them altogether.

"I can't say I was in a box," said Ms. de Lavallade, who will perform the 1972 work "The Creation," created by her husband, Geoffrey Holder. "I didn't pay attention. When the opportunity was there, I took it."