BRONX/DANCE/MAGAZINE

Spring/Summer 2014 Tina Pratt At Home in the Bronx

Draft

Letter from the Editor

The Bronx Dance Magazine continues its quest to find dancers who make the Bronx their home and have a rich history in dance. When I attended an art event in the Bronx, the wonderful multi-talented performer Diamond Redd, who did his musical cabaret Homo Harlem at BAAD! several years ago, and who was also there to enjoy an installation by the artist George Zavala introduced me to Tina Pratt. He said Arthur I want you to meet a friend of mine. She is a dancer. She did burlesque and she is amazing. I spent some time talking with Tina at the event. Her history rolled off her tongue with ease and I immediately thought, The Bronx Dance Magazine. Our community needs to know that this groundbreaking woman is here and has been living in the Bronx for the past 35 years, and she was dancing long before I was even born. I had a great opportunity to sit in her Bronx apartment where and have conversation with her and Diamond Redd.

It's afternoons like the one I spent with Tina, that inspire me to continue wokring and holding a place for dance in the Bronx. I hope you enjoy your time with her on these pages as much as I enjoyed my talk with her one wintry afternoon on the Grand Concourse.

Arthur Aviles, Editor-in-Chief

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We appreciate feedback and/or additions to the magazine. If you would like to join the Volunteer staff; please contact us at 718-918-2110. Visit on the web at www.BronxDanceCoalition.org This project is made possible with support from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and Councilwoman Carmen Arroyo.

Bronx Dance Magazine and Bronx Dance Coalition are projects of Arthur Aviles Typical Theatre and operate from the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!), 2474 Westchester Avenue, Bronx, NY 10461. BAAD! was co-founded by dancer/choreographer Arthur Aviles and writer/activist Charles Rice-González.

Tina Pratt

Burlesque Dancer Hoofer Maverick

The wonderful perfomer Diamond Redd introduced the prolific dancer, Tina Pratt to Arthur Aviles at an art event at the Andrew Freedman Home in the Fall of 2013 that had an installation by the artist George Zavala. Aviles spent some time with her and immediately thought, "This is our next Bronx Dance Magazine cover story."

Tina Pratt, a Bronxite and a trailblazing burlesque performer, was awarded a 2008 Hoofer Award from the American Tap Foundation and she's danced with Sammy Davis, Jr., Nancy Wilson, Pearl Bailey, Phyllis Diller, Howard "Sandman" Sims and the Hines brothers.

Aviles visited with her in her Bronx apartment in winter 2014 on the Grand Concourse and 167th Street, and Diamond Redd came along. Below is an edited transcript of their afternoon. As Aviles was setting up for the interview, Tina turned on one light after another. As the room began to glow, Arthur gasped, "Wow!" Tina puts on more disco lights and Arthur and Tina laugh.

Diamond Redd: How many years you've been here?

Tina: Since '79.

Arthur: This is like a party room!

Tina: Party Time!

DRedd: When is your birthday, baby?

Tina: January 15, 1935. I just turned 39.

(Everyone laughs.)

Arthur: So pronounce your own name.

Tina: Ernestine Phyllis Elaine Grace Gloria Gene Pratt. (Diamond laughs.) My stage name was Tina, because no one can pronounce Ernestine. I was born in Pittsburgh.

DRedd: And tell him all the other people that came from Pittsburgh.

Tina: Oh there's Ahmad Jamal, the Turn Team Brothers, Errol Gardner and his brother Linton Gardner, and Linton is the one that wrote music for the dancers. (Diamond Red feeds names to Tina.) Oh and Billy Epstein, Maxine Sullivan.

Tina Pratt, 1974

DRedd: Know who else was from Pittsburgh? Gene Kelly. Tina probably went to the same studio when she was a little girl.

Arthur: How old were you when you started?

Tina: Six. The first school I went to was Sarah Caudwell Dawson where I met Jamal. Then, I went to the Mamie Barth Studio. I [took] Tap, Acrobatics and Ballet.

Arthur: What made you think that you wanted to go into theater

or dance?

Tina: Well one of my brothers, there were six brothers and three girls, was married to a dancer who was in a dance with Clarence Robinson.

Tina Pratt, 13 years old

DRedd: He was a big producer, he produced *Stormy Weather* the 1943 [movie] with Cab Calloway, Lena Horn, Tom Delay, Bobby Lopez.

Tina: They wanted me to be like her, her name was Roberta Harris, so my father put me in dancing school and that was the best dancing school on the east coast, the Mamie Barth Studio and most of those dancers that left there went to The Rockettes, and Gene Kelly went to Broadway.

Arthur: What is your mother's name?

Tina: Annabelle Pratt, and my father was Ernest Pratt.

DRedd: He adored the ground she walked on.

Arthur: And how about your grandparents?

Tina: Um, they're from Georgia. My grandmother's name was Carry Smith and Edgar was my grandfather.

Arthur: And how about her mother?

Tina: I cannot go any further than that. There were 7 daughters and one son that my grandmother came from and they lived on Peach Tree Street. it was a plantation.

DRedd: That's a very famous street in Atlanta.

Tina: There was Irish in them, you know. All of them passed for white except my grandmother and the sister above her and the baby brother the boy was the last of the children, they had Negroid features. But the rest of them they looked white, and they passed for white. Some moved to Detroit.

Arthur: So, they go from Georgia to Detroit and to Pittsburgh?

Tina: Yes.

Arthur: Was your grandmother or anyone from your family or from her lineage performing artists.

Tina: No, I'm the only one. Well, my brother's wife, Roberta Harris. She was in New York dancing in different shows and stuff. The Savanna Club. Clarence Robinson's shows.

Arthur: Wow, where in NY exactly?

Tina: The Savana club was in the village. There was Zanzibar. She worked in Harlem and Atlantic City. So what happened during her era was that all the girls were marrying boxers, because boxers were very big at that time and my brother was a boxer

DRedd: Like Joe Louis.

Tina: My brother was a boxer Booby Harris I mean Bobby Pratt, and my brother won the Golden Gloves twice before World War II broke out. But I always took dance classes and it wasn't until I was 40 that I learned how to tap dance. Although I did jazz, I belonged to an Afro Cuban act.

DRedd: She worked with a lot of Latino musicians like Bobby Sanabria and they loved working with her and she loved working with them.

Arthur: What was your first job as a professional?

Tina: I was in Beavertown in Pittsburgh, tap dancing. Then I went into shake dancer, an exotic dancer. I did chorus line dancing. I did Afro-Cuban dancing. I did it all.

DRedd: She did burlesque. She was really a star with burlesque. She worked the white clubs that really were not bring black dancers.

Arthur: And this is when?

Tina: That came in the '50's. I became a strip teaser, not what they're doing today. (Arthur laughs.) Well, they don't know how to strip [these days].

DRedd: She would do the Dance of the Seven Veils.

Tina: I did a style like 1947 Sally Rand, but she had fans. Georgia Southern, Sally Keith, Gypsy Rose Lee, I come from that era.

DRedd: Gypsie Rose Lee was the coolest because she would say little double entendres and not take a thing off.

Tina: It was about walking as striptease. You can take off all your clothes and don't show nothing.

Arthur: Now, how did you do that?

Tina: You use your clothes to cover yourself.

Arthur: And did you learn this from someone?

Tina: Yes I worked in a burlesque theater and that's how I got into it. First one was Princess Dormer. I had not seen a white woman take her clothes off and I ran out the theater scared to death because I'm from Pittsburg. (She laughs.) I've forgotten the name of the street and I

Tina Pratt Performing in Europe

can't remember the theater but it was burlesque. She did a whole Indian thing she had a headdress that went all the way down to the floor and when I saw her breasts it was all net. That's how they danced. You never saw anything.

DRedd: Flesh, you never saw flesh. Flesh positive they call it.

Tina: Dancers in those days had a whole scene. She had a teepee and a totem pole all of that. After I got over the frightfulness of seeing a white woman because Pittsburg was very racist, very segregated, I started meeting these ladies and they found out that I was a dancer. They helped me with wardrobe and everything, especially Clarity Claire, she took me under her wing. The funny thing was I didn't know a lot of the songs were by Duke Ellington.

DRedd: And they loved to strip to this dude.

Tina: I thought he was white.

DRedd: Girl, no!

Tina: And these acts had everything choreographed down to the wardrobe.

Arthur: And that was your first professional…

Tina: Well I started out at 15 years old but I started out as a tap dancer.

Arthur: Where did you tap dance?

DRedd: They had variety shows with different acts.

Tina: They called them the "chitlin' circuit" and they had the VA Post things like that. They had clubs in Cleveland, Detroit, Buffalo…clubs, not show bars, but clubs. So, I went from Pittsburgh to the Cleveland show bars where I did the burlesque and I did the cabaret shows. They [also] had these whole set ups where people would bring their own drinks and they had entertainers. From there I went to Canada where they had fantastic clubs almost door to door. I worked 8 months up there without working in the same club twice. The big clubs like the Macombo, the Morocco, the Top Hat. I tried to become a Canandian.

Arthur: Was that through the chitin circuit?

DRedd: Ain't no chilin's up in Canada.

(They all laugh.)

Tina: From there I went to Detroit [in the early '50's] and that's where I met Barry Rich, the photographer, at the Flame Show Bar, and I met Morgana King, [a jazz singer] who played the mother to Marlon Brando in the Godfather. and that was the club where Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington and everybody started out.

DRedd: Big names. LaVerne Baker used to wear a fish tail gown and a white wig.

(They laugh.)

DRedd: Let me ask you this so you work in Cleveland then who brings you to Canada?

Tina: I got an agent when I was 19.

DRedd: So you are on your own working?

Tina: Yes.

Arthur: So you had an act, right? Like Sally Rand she had feathers and the balls.

Tina: My thing was the middle part of my act I did the drums. I put it to music like Ponciana and Night in Tunisia [jazz classics]. And I did acrobatics I was very good in acrobatics. I couldn't stand on my head and bump and grind. I JUST COULDN'T DO THAT, so I did acrobatics, and I did back bends. I also had a choreographer. I think it was Donald Fountain of The Fountain Trio who gave me an act to 'Round Midnight by Thelonius Monk, and it was all floor work. I laid on the floor and I moved my arms my legs and my veils.

Arthur: And what was your dress like or was it like a swim suit type of thing?

Tina: No a gown. But I had different colors.

Arthur: Oh my God, that's great. So the costumes must be made to fit the form and also because you're doing acrobatics they have to like fit you in a certain way unlike a gown.

Tina: And I had, um, G-Strings, little bikini panties.

DRedd: Back then that was scandals, your cheeks were out.

Tina: They would make me wear pants underneath it. I had to dye the pants to my color so you wouldn't see it.

DRedd: Illusion. She was an illusionist. The illusion of nakedness.

Tina: One time I was a part of a dance act, Tushy Dancers, in Boston. We had a part of our act where we made a tale out of my jockey strap and I wind it up. I decided not to wear these pants. I just wore the strap and the police came after us. (She laughs.) My dance partner said, "No no, no, she had those pants on." I mean he talked them down. So after they left he asked, "You did have them pants on?" I said, "Nope." (She and Diamond Red laugh.) We could have gone to jail.

Arthur: You were being a radical.

Tina: Yeah, but that was so funny about Boston. I can't begin to tell you how prejudice it was.

Arthur: Did you stay long in Boston?

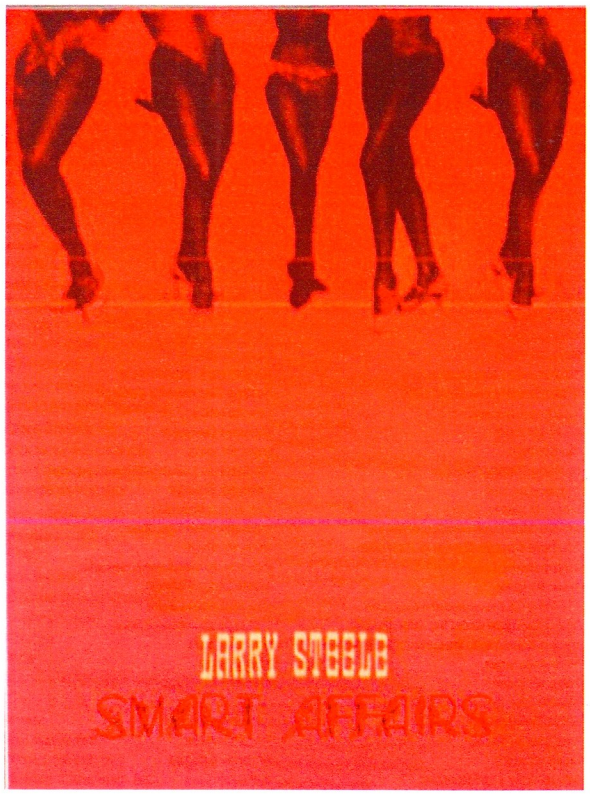
Tina: Sixteen long years. I did my strip teasing when I first went there and I worked at all the clubs. I was driving a Triumph and an MGB (small sports cars).

Arthur: Sounds like they paid you well.

Tina: Yes, because you had to drink with the customers.

DRedd: And the manager says if you want to work here you've got to drink with these fools. They like you and they want to drink with you.

Tina: I can't begin to tell you how many times I was called a nigger. But I had to solicit drinks so what I would is get The New York Times every morning and I'd read about what's going on so that when I went to work I would ask



the gentlemen if we would talk about current events and so that's how I got through otherwise I was trouble.

Arthur: How much would you work?

Tina: It was 6 days I can't remember. We did have one day off. We did three shows a night and it would cross with the soliciting of drinks. It wasn't like the chitlin' circuit, the chitlin' circuit was a lot of fun. These clubs [in Boston] were owned by blacks, and your act was two or three minutes, wasn't more than 5 minutes. And we could visit other clubs [in the area] and sometimes perform in those clubs, too, but then when the white clubs opened up to us it was altogether different because you couldn't leave the club. But before Boston, I traveled to Montana, Indianapolis, Kansas City, then I went to Baltimore and then I took ill and stayed in Miami, but I couldn't get a job down there cause the West Indians had that all sewed up. So they sent me to Boston.

DRedd: She has worked with really forgotten great people. Tell him a little bit about Donald Fountain.

Tina: Oh, Donald started out with a fella named Lauren Fountian, and not only did he dance but he also made wardrobe he was with Larry Steele's "Smart Affairs"

show. It was like a Vegas production at Club Harlem [in Atlantic City]. They were there every summer which would work a couple weeks and that's where I worked with Sammy Davis, Jr. and Pearl Bailey came through, and a lot of entertainers.

Arthur: And they were on a bill with you?

Tina: Yes.

Arthur: You weren't back up to them?

Tina: No, no. I was a part of a chorus line. A chorus line like the Rockettes. Then you have different single acts.

Arthur: Unison with a group of people?

Tina: Yeah, we did a tilly – when all the girls kick, kick. But most of the time the Club Harlem was the one that I worked in the chorus lines, but most of the time I was a single act.

Arthur: Doing your own act?

Tina: Doing my own act.

Arthur: Well, what happened to the chitlin' circuit?

Tina: Well, what happened was the black musicians had their own union, but when they merged with the whites well that meant they could supposedly work the white clubs. Well, that didn't happen, but the money went up and the black clubs couldn't afford them anymore. So, that was the end of the chitlin' circuit. So, they got rid of the chorus line dancers. The producers couldn't afford it. So, I spent sixteen years in Boston, and you realize that Boston was worse that the south in terms of prejudice, and so I came to New York in 1977.

Arthur: 1977? That was the disco era.

Tina: Yeah.

Arthur: Did that effect you in anyway?

Tina: No because I started producing shows in Boston before I came down here and I was with an 18 piece band, Jackie Harris.

Arthur: So you are continuing this kind of live music.

Tina: Live music in the village. Funny thing is I was working not only in the village, but with the Cubans in Union City. So, yeah I was doing Cuban dancing. Thank god I had a car to cross over to from the Village to Union City.

Arthur: Where did you live in New York?

Tina: I lived next door. I lived with Dakota Staton. [A famous Jazz singer.]

Arthur: Here in the Bronx? So you moved here in 1979?

Tina: Dakota Staton paid for this apartment for me.

DRedd: Dakota Staton was one of our premier Jazz performers.

Tina: [Her big hit was] *The Late, Late Show* [in 1957].

DRedd: She was fantastic. A wonderful voice. Her version of *My Funny Valentine* is just so…and I saw her do the *The*

Dakota Staton, Famous Jazz Singer and Tina's Friend

ate Show which starts "Gee its cozy in the park tonight. When you cuddle up and hold me tight; Stars above, they seem to know, We're puttin' on the late late show!" And then she does another one of those, then she said, "Oh, I forgot the bridge." But she tore it up.

DRedd: So Tina worked with Dakota and they are both from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and there has always been an alliance in the black show business community musicians and the dancers they have always affected each other a great deal

Arthur: Do you have performing experience in the Bronx you know like the Hunts Point Palace?

Tina: I did some shows for the Bronx Council on the Arts and The Bronx Museum. I put a show together at Lehman College and I did a workshop at St. Ann's, I did a few things.

Arthur: Cool, but you have never danced at the Hunts Point Palace? Did you know about that those clubs in that era?

Tina: That was before my time.

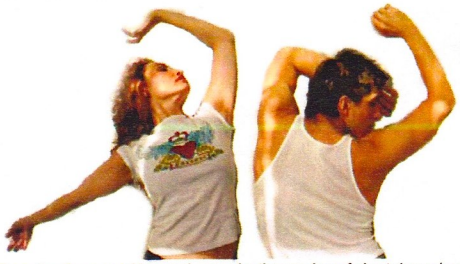
Arthur: Right, when you moved here they were gone. Wow, well it's incredible that you sustained a career that period of time and on your own terms.

Tina: (Takes in the comment and nods.) Yes, I did.

Boogie Down Dance at the New BAAD!

Saturday, May 3 at 8pm / $20

Bronx-centric



From the Bronx and beyond, an eclectic evening of short dance/performance works by **Esteban Arana & Leticia Pleguero, Edwin Concepción, Ranardo Domeico-Grays VISIONS Contemporary Ballet, Jane Gabriels, Trina Mannino, Sage Rivera, Awilda Rodriguez-Lora, Alice Teirstein & Marsi Burns, Nelida Tirado** and **Jesse Vega.**

Friday & Saturday, May 9 & 10 at 8pm / $20

Antonio Ramos' NEVERLAND

Choreographer **Antonio Ramos** brings his poignant and whimsical full evening dance piece inspired by movement that traverses queer and homeless youth culture from the Christopher Street piers to drag ballrooms to contemporary dance that pops with verve and style.

Saturday, May 17 at 8pm / $20

Toni ReneeJohnson's MAVERICK DANCE EXPERIENCE

This dance group has been the artists in residence at BAAD! for the past year and will present new work in the inimitable elegant, energetic, thought-provoking Maverick style.

Sunday, May 18 at 1:30pm / Free

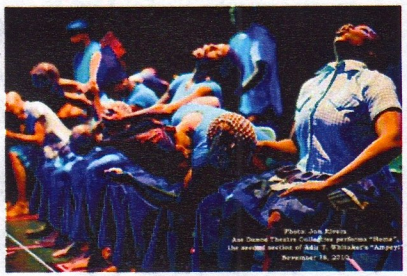
Dancing in the Streets and BAAD! (Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance), in partnership with Westchester Square BID present

MERIAN SOTO'S BRANCH DANCES

This FREE public performance of **Merián Soto's** magical ***Branch Dances*** will take place on the grounds of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, a Gothic Revival Church building in Westchester Square right beside BAAD! In a one-hour performance, **Merián Soto**, **Arthur Aviles**, and 10 Bronx-based dancers-will move in response to the heft, form, and texture of large tree branches, which they will carry on their shoulders and interact with in myriad ways.

Friday and Saturday, May 30 and 31 at 8pm / $20

Dancing While Black: Collective(s) Action



Choreographer and dancer, **Paloma McGregor** returns with a new installment of Dancing While Black. Featuring new performance works by Rashida Bumbray/Dance Diaspora Collective , **Ebony Noelle Golden/The Body Ecology Performance Ensemble** and **Adia Whitaker/Ase Dance Theater Collective**. The weekend, produced by Angela's Pulse, in partnership with Urban Bush Women, will also include a pre-show panel discussion at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, addressing collectivism andcommunity in black aesthetics, as well as a full day of Master Classes on Saturday, highlighting African Diaspora movement forms.

This photo was given to the Bronx Dance Magazine curtsey of Dance Magazine editor ,Wendy Perron (Dorothy Perron's daughter). Dorothy is featured in the 3rd issue of the Bronx Dance Magazine.

Marathon Dancing
The Bronx
Circa 1940