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Choreographer Nora Chipaumire brings dark vision of singer Miriam Makeba to Miami

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Antoine Tempé / Antoine Tempé

'Miriam': Okwui Okpokwasili, left, and Nora Chipaumire.

Miriam Makeba's music was part of life's soundtrack when Nora Chipaumire was growing up in Zimbabwe in the 1970s and '80s. But the dancer-choreographer had never thought much about the revered singer until she died in 2008, and was startled to find herself deeply shaken.

"What that made me realize is she had become an icon," says Chipaumire, 48. "I guess I didn't realize how much she meant to me until they announced she was dead."

That moment inspired the dance theater piece *Miriam*, which [Chipaumire](#), an acclaimed New York-based choreographer, will perform this weekend at the Miami Light Project's Wynwood performance space, sponsored by [Miami Light](#) and Miami Dade College's [MDC Live Arts](#).

Raised in Johannesburg by a poor single mother, [Makeba](#) left South Africa in 1959 after her appearance in an anti-apartheid documentary led to a trip to the Venice Film Festival. She spent 30 years in exile for her opposition to the South African regime, becoming as famous as an emblem of human rights as she was as an artist. She suffered a fatal heart attack at a concert in Italy while singing [Pata Pata](#), her first and biggest hit.

Also raised by a struggling single mother, Chipaumire has been motivated by political activism since she endured the bitter civil war in which Zimbabwean revolutionaries (among them her aunts) overthrew the country's racist colonial government.

Miriam is not a literal biography. Instead, Chipaumire uses the singer's life to invoke issues that inspire her dance theater work: what she sees as oppressive and insidious Western stereotypes of mysterious, sexualized black women, and of Africa as a savage, irredeemably conflicted place.

She felt a personal connection to Makeba as an artist sustaining herself and her artistry in exile.

"I understand what it's like to live away from home, but I have [done] that by choice and she had no choice," says Chipaumire, who was 23 when she came to the United States in 1989. "That touched me profoundly.

"Also her being a person who lives from the fruits of her imagination, how difficult that is. How do you keep yourself anchored in what is culturally true to you, but how do you also keep exploring? Her stature just grew in my mind."

Part of Makeba's allure was her exoticism; she often sang traditional music (another of her hits was [The Click Song](#), in her father's Xhosa language) and wore traditional African robes and headdresses. She became [Mama Africa](#), an earth-mother emblem.

But when she married black-power advocate Stokely Carmichael in 1968, she was blacklisted by the music industry, her tours and record deals canceled. The experience drove her to live for 15 years in Guinea, a country she championed. She suffered a backlash as president Ahmed Sekou Toure's regime became corrupt and dictatorial — a similar trajectory to that of Zimbabwe's revolutionary leader Robert Mugabe.

Makeba's story has renewed resonance in the wake of South African leader Nelson Mandela's death and the focus it brought to the contradictions that can arise between the image of revered figures and their human failings.

Makeba had her share of troubles. She was married five times, lost her only daughter in 1985 and was an alcoholic. But when, in the course of Chipaumire's research, a filmmaker who had worked with Makeba told her the singer was "mean, angry, she hated white people, she could not trust anybody," she was deeply upset. "I held her on such a pedestal. I didn't want to hear she could have a mean streak."

The discovery forced Chipaumire away from what might have been a worshipful piece toward one that is figuratively and literally darker. Miriam is so dimly lit that the audience sometimes has to struggle to see.

"I am very keen on this dark hue as a way to explain where I and Makeba come from," Chipaumire says. "The darkness in that space is a way for me to get at an emotional and psychological space for myself and the audience.

"It seemed to me that those were the conundrums she was dealing with — the expectations about Africa, the stereotypes of what a black woman is — and those are some of the conundrums I deal with.

"There is something that vexes us all about Africa as this unknowable place. Maybe we want it to be unknowable. Maybe Makeba has to be this beacon of light."

The piece is her first to include another performer, Nigerian-American Okwui Okpokwasili. The score is by Omar Sosa, because Chipaumire felt the Cuban-born musician understood "the idea of being unanchored, of being exiled in the world, what it's like to make home your work, so the music is your home."

That complexity, as well as Chipaumire's charisma and her use of African traditional dance to create an original, intensely physical dance language, have made her one of the more

compelling figures in contemporary dance, says Georgiana Pickett, who as director of 651 Arts in Brooklyn, sponsored Chipaumire's first solo works.

"She's thinking in a very big way," says Pickett, now executive director of the Baryshnikov Arts Center. "She's uncompromising. She's completely committed to very intellectual and political ideas. But she's using her body, her physicality. ... She's not spoon-feeding anyone. Miriam might be one of the most opaque and murky pieces she's made. In a way you're searching the stage for the meaning, for the dance, so it's an interesting metaphor."

When Miami Light presented Chipaumire two years ago in a show that included an excerpt from Miriam, audiences were both captivated and confused, says executive director Beth Boone.

"She demands something of you. She's grappling with such deep issues and themes ... and she's pushing physical limits. I think she's an artist who defines riveting."

Chipaumire is looking forward to her return to Miami, where she taught a monthlong choreographic workshop last summer for Miami Dade College. She hopes audiences here will instinctively understand Makeba.

"Miami is the home of the immigrant, and everybody knows there's a dark side to that," she says. "But there's also a beautiful courage. I wanted Miriam to speak to courage, beauty, and also the loss."