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De Cajón Project Gives Voice to 'Afrodescendientes'

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Erin Johnson Special to The Skanner News
 Published: 29 July 2010



Consuelo Palmer-Bormann speaks to a student

Resonating booms, high wooden clacking and a smooth rattle filled the University of Washington dance studios last weekend. Dr. Monica Rojas and the artists of the DE CAJÓN project taught Afro-Peruvian rhythms and movement in a workshop that highlighted the history behind the art.

Rojas, who has a doctorate in sociocultural anthropology from UW, created DE CAJÓN about a year ago, and has since travelled with the project around the Pacific Northwest performing and teaching. She describes it as an effort to recognize and celebrate Peru's African people as a major force in the shaping of Peruvian art and culture.

"I'm educating through performance," she said. "When I first came (to Seattle) I was amazed no one knew there were Black people in Peru."

In her workshop, Rojas outlined the history of Afro-Peruvian music and dance, and stressed the importance of using that history when students create their artwork.

"I want them to know the significance of what they're doing," she said.

Rojas uses the term "glocal" to describe the project because their work "echoes the efforts" of Afro-Peruvian people to gain cultural recognition in Peru. She creates her art to stand behind their struggles.

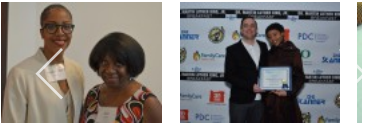
"You are doing politics - you're making a statement," she said.

Spanish conquistadors brought African people to Peru in the 1500s to work in the gold and silver mines, explained Rojas in her workshop. Throughout the history of Peru, a special vein of movement and music originated from the descendants of these people.

The main instrument, the cajón -- which the project is named for -- was first used by African slaves in Peru and has been recognized as the official instrument of the country. Today it has gained world-wide popularity and is used in many forms of

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Spanish and Latino music. Box-like in shape, the cajón's origins are unclear, but Rojas said one theory is that it began as wooden boxes or drawers played like drums.

Rojas identified two other instruments in the workshop that originated from Afrodescendientes, or African decedents. One, named the Cajita, is a trapezoidal wooden box with a lid and a playing stick, which Rojas said was originally a church donation collection box. The second is the Quijada, a donkey jawbone with teeth that has been dried and modified to create different pitches of rattle.

Consuelo Palmer-Bormann, a senior in the UW dance program, participated in the workshop, which was sponsored by the school's Dance Student Association.

"I find it fascinating that people can use what they have and create music," she said.

Rojas began the workshop with historical presentation that included videos, before moving on to the music and dance portion.

"Having that as a background makes you appreciate the culture," Palmer-Bormann said. "It makes you feel as if you are a part of it."

Dr. Juliet McMains, assistant professor at the University of Washington, brought together Rojas and DSA to sponsor the workshop.

"I thought it would be a nice exchange," McMains said.

The class attracted around 30 people, mostly community members and their children. While the adults sat down on their cajónes to learn the rhythms, their kids perched on mini-cajónes and played along.

"I was interested in the multi-generational aspect," said McMains about the workshop. "It's a beautiful and different model."

Rojas said that there is some recognition of the contributions of Afro-Peruvians in Peru, who make up about 10 percent of the population, but negative stereotypes still persist in the media.

"Many artists are activists to promote a more positive perception," said Rojas. By being active through the DE CAJÓN project, and by educating people in the U.S. about Afro-Peruvian art and culture, Rojas sees herself as an extension of the activism in Peru.

"This is my way to be there," she said.

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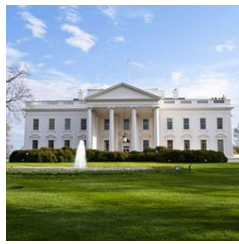
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