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'Branded' by history, freed by artistry on ice
Experiences of isolation led to courage on ice.

By ROHAN PRESTON

STAFF WRITER

Ice Capades it is not. "**Being Branded**," a fusion of modern dance and skating that plays Ridder Ice Arena in Minneapolis on Thursday and Friday, weaves stories of alienation, history and triumph into a concert on the ice. The production features skating stars of color from across the nation, including north Minneapolis' Rohene Ward and Deneane Richburg, the Maplewood woman who conceived and choreographed the show.

For Richburg, the concert has been part of the evolution of her own sense of self. She believes that it will help people interested in learning about how history affects their lives.

"The fact that it's on the ice means that people will be entertained," said Richburg, 32. "There's artistry and skill and beauty there. But this concert is really an event about history. Beneath all this modernity, beneath all the things that we have and can do, we're still dealing with similar issues that others dealt with in our past."

When she was growing up in Maplewood in the 1980s, Richburg could count the number of fellow blacks in her community on both hands. Becoming aware of her differences from her peers and friends often made her feel "inferior, like an alien," she said. "It wasn't by any fault of the teachers or coaches. It just happened to be the circumstances I found myself in. My parents did their best to make sure I knew my value as a child."

It wasn't until she was in the eighth grade at Mounds Park Academy, when she read Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," that she had a language for how she was feeling. Richburg said she could identify with the shame felt by Pecola Breedlove, Morrison's heroine, who wished to disappear.

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To counteract negative thoughts, Richburg found herself devouring books about black art and culture. This immersion in African-American history, which she pursued as an undergraduate at Carleton College as well as in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Temple University, where she earned an MFA, helped to fortify her intellect and spirit. It also helped her to survive.

Even as she continued her education, she kept up skating. An early injury actually helped to clarify her path, she said. She could no longer pursue the professional skating career that she wanted, so she studied dance, the next best thing.

"There's a lot more that's allowed in dance, technically, so it was freeing," she said. "Branded" comes out of her 2006 master's thesis she did at Temple. Despite a name that suggests identifying cattle or a corporate marketing seminar, the show is really a skating extravaganza about some historical difficulties that blacks have overcome. The stories told on ice include that of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who was displayed in Europe in the 19th century because of her prodigious rear end.

The concert also includes Ami Parekh, a former competitive dancer who has represented India in the world championship competitions. She translates bharatanatyam dance to the ice.

"When something is branded, it carries a mark," Richburg said.

"In some ways, we all carry stuff from history. And we have to deal with these things and then shake them off in order to have progress. We're doing that on the ice."

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BEING BRANDED

What: A skating and dance concert by performers of color.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thu. & Fri.

Where: Ridder Ice Arena, University of Minnesota, 1901 SE. 4th St., Mpls.

Tickets: \$12-\$25. 651-777-9119 or
www.mbccculturaleventg.eventbrite.com

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