

Dance dynamo takes the knight

Robyn Orlin has defied convention and challenged apartheid, pushing performance art to excel

MONICA LAGANPARSAD

CONTROVERSIAL choreographer Robyn Orlin has done so well at challenging convention that she was once labelled "a permanent irritation".

Yesterday the "eccentric" dancer, who outraged apartheid-era arts critics with her rebellious work, was honoured with yet another prestigious international award.

Orlin was made a knight in the French National Order of Merit at a ceremony in Johannesburg last night. The award is aimed at honouring French citizens and foreigners for their achievements.

"I didn't ever think I would get something like that but then... the French really have a high respect for culture," said Orlin.

The 53-year-old artist — who now lives in Germany with her husband, Oliver Schmitz, and adopted daughter Ruby Nomalanga, 5 — has been in SA for five weeks. She leaves for France tomorrow where another of

her shows, *Dressed to Kill*, opens.

Her latest piece, exploring the traditional music form of *isicathamiya* and which premiered as part of the FNB Dance Umbrella 2009 in Johannesburg on the weekend, is entitled: *Walking next to your shoes... intoxicated by strawberries and cream, we enter continents without knocking...*

Quite a mouthful, but typical of Orlin.

One of her previous works, awarded the UK's Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance in 2003, was called: *Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other.*

Yet another, on HIV/Aids in 2001, was boldly named: *We Must Eat Our Suckers With the Wrappers On.*

As a young dancer in the '80s, Orlin joined Johannesburg's artistic centre and became controversial, using dance to challenge apartheid.

In 1982, she joined the city's Federated Union of Black Artists academy where she created a conten-



OUT THE BOX: Robyn Orlin's latest work, *Love Minus Project*, was performed on the weekend as part of the FNB Dance Umbrella 2009 at the Market Theatre in Newtown, which she calls her 'second home' Pictures: JAMES OATWAY



TRAILBLAZER: Robyn Orlin tackles issues creatively

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porary dance section. Orlin went on to study at the London School of Contemporary Dance and completed a master's degree in fine arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has worked across mediums in France, Germany and South Africa.

But it's her unusual titles and engaging themes, reflecting issues of

women, social abuse and homelessness that have kept audiences captivated — and sometimes offended.

Famously labelled "a permanent irritation" by a South African critic, it wasn't long before she earned enemies in France.

"I think I irritated the opera people in France when I worked with the Paris Opera Ballet. But it was

very important to me for Europe to start thinking about other continents and not just themselves," she said.

Orlin, who is in remission from breast cancer, said she couldn't forget about Aids.

"I am saddened by the ignorance and the denial around it. I just don't think we fought the struggle against apartheid to have this attitude towards an illness," she said.

Though her travels have taken her across the world, Orlin still calls the Market Theatre her "second home".

But she said more funding for arts and culture in SA was needed.

"It needs to come from government and we need to look at community-based projects, and also look after professionals..."

"I just want people here to be proud of the work that artists do and stop looking at them as if they're freaks and losers because they're not making a fortune of money."

"We work extremely hard and need that dignity and recognition."