**‘American Smooth’: This is what it sounds like when Rita Dove flies**

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There is nothing like a catastrophe to clarify what life is all about. As poet Rita Dove worked at home late one night in September 1998, lightning struck, flinging her husband, German novelist Fred Viebahn, from his study and setting their place ablaze. Dove and Viebahn hustled out as fire engulfed their home. The conflagration caused $250,000 in damage.

In the wake of that experience Dove resolved to seize the day, pursuing long-held interests. One of the things she had always admired was ballroom dancing. She and her husband took lessons as a toast to life.

Today, a style of ballroom dance lends itself to the title of Dove’s eighth poetry collection, “American Smooth.” Publisher’s Weekly praised the book as another example of Dove’s “vivid narrative gifts and formal versatility.”

“I didn’t set out to write these poems, I set out to live,” said Dove, 51, from her repaired Charlottesville, Va., home. “I do believe that you don’t write out of detached genius, but out of living intensely. Even someone like Rilke, brilliant as he was, lived intensely. The art comes out of life; you don’t live for art.” Dove reads from “American Smooth” today at 2 p.m. at the Ted Mann Concert Hall in Minneapolis.

In the literary firmament, Dove’s star remains one of the brightest: 1987 Pulitzer Prize winner for her poetry collection “Thomas and Beulah,” U.S. poet laureate from 1993 to 1995, recipient of 20 honorary degrees, novelist, playwright – her curriculum vitae at the University of Virginia, where she is Commonwealth professor of English, lists several pages of accolades.

Despite the huge celebrity, Dove sees herself in ordinary, even pedestrian terms. “Whenever people remind me that they see me as Rita Dove with quotation marks, it’s highly disconcerting,” she said. “I'm a person who does the same things as others.”

Part of Dove’s intense living has meant pursuits in areas where she is not a star. She takes voice lessons and plays the viola da gamba, a 17th-century cello-like instrument. But it is dance that has jazzed her, a pursuit in which she can lose herself.

“When you start out, you are concerned initially with the steps, box steps, what angle, where’s the center of the room, inside of the toe or not – down to that small of a point,” she said. “Then in the end, no one should be watching you; they should be transported by the dance itself.”

**Stop breathing**

There has always been a mystic, fleeting quality in Dove’s poetry, like trying to capture the impossible – say cupping light in the hands or “stepping into the shadow to pin it the moment it moves. Part of what I’m trying to capture is the fact that you can’t really capture a gesture or figure or feeling; you get a glimpse of something, then it disappears,” she said.

“In the moments when something grabs us utterly, which are really lyric poem moments, when something seizes you like that, you realize that you had to walk away from breathing in order to have such moments. Once you start breathing again, the moment slides away.”

All of her themes and artistry – from the personal history that characterized “Thomas and Beulah” to the brilliant, soulful craftsmanship of “On the Bus with Rosa Parks” and other works – are crystallized in “American Smooth.” She divides the volume into five sections, including poems about dance (“Fox-Trot Sundays”); black American soldiers in France during World War I (“Not Welcome Here”); and a commissioned series that is displayed in the rotunda of a new courthouse (“Twelve Chairs”).

Like a faceted stone that shimmers brilliantly, “American Smooth” teems with poems that shine from back to front, front to back, offering new light with each reading.

In “Sic Itur Ad Astra,” whose title is taken from Virgil, Dove writes of her way to the stars:

Bed, where are you flying to?

I went to sleep

nearly an hour ago,

and now I’m on a porch

open to the stars!

Close my eyes

and sink back to

day’s tiny dismissals;

open wide and I’m

barefoot, nightshirt

fluttering white as a sail.

What will they say

when they find me

missing -- just

the shape of my dreaming

creasing the sheets?

In “American Smooth,” Dove uses ballroom dance as a model of what she would like to achieve, both on the dance floor and in literature: to use a form as a foundation from which to fly off into other areas. Her collection includes persona poems on Hattie McDaniels, the first black to win an Oscar, and blues diva Bessie Smith. She writes about angel food and intimations of angels. And she invests Adam and Eve with the gestures of dancers: “heads tilted as if straining / to make out the words to a song / played long ago, in a foreign land.”

Dance is used not just as a stepping stone for other explorations but also as metaphor for structure and for freedom. Many of the poems in this collection, her first in five years, talk not only about the beauty of the dance but also the precision, pain and even the artifice (“smile smile even in pain” she says in one poem).

“Freedom is not about not having no boundaries whatsoever, but about taking the boundaries and limitations and finding that moment of absolute relief,” she said. “The most deliciously tasted freedom is when you have constraints that you slip away from and blossom in. I don’t want to sound like a masochist, like I like pain, but the sense of formula and context are so inextricably wound up with freedom.”

When Dove talks about her latest avocation, it sounds like she’s talking about her own delicately hewn poetry, known for its masterful craftsmanship, its variety of cadences and often arrestingly evocative images.

“When I began ballroom dancing, we were counting our steps, feeling the edge of the box,” she said. “There are moments now when we're dancing where the box disappears. We are doing everything according to the rules but our feet barely touch the ground.”

In her title poem she writes: “We had done it / (for two measures? / four?) – achieved flight, / that swift and serene magnificence.”