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writers on dancing

June 15, 2009

Halfway through the EDF Version 31

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival

“Return of the Sun”

Palace of Fine Arts

San Francisco, CA

June 6 and 13, 2009

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At midpoint of this year’s San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, the crowds were perhaps a little smaller but as enthusiastically supportive of these artists as ever. The Festival format—a two-hour show of soloists and groups who embody cultures from around the globe—has proven itself. Still this love feast and way to honor the mythologies and customs of what used to be, and probably no longer are, rural cultures has evolved.

Most notable in the last few years has been the absence of the large ensembles that celebrated East European traditions—Polish, Hungarian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Greek. Many of those had grown out of the folk dance movement in the sixties. Their place in the Festival has been taken by groups which reflect the Bay Area’s changing populations (Korean, Cuban) and ensembles which present the diversity of cultures which used to be lumped together, particularly from Asia—India, China, Indonesia, the Philippines.

Someday, it might be fascinating to see an evening of Balinese, Sudanese and Javanese dance, or a program of the Spanish influence in Mexico, Peru or the Philippines. Or Islam’s in Indonesia, Morocco or Uzbekistan. The dances are there, and they are still alive.

If in the early days, live music was rather the exception than the rule, the Festival has worked hard at encouraging it. They have been rather successful to the point where last year—at EDF’s 30th anniversary-- an unexpected windfall of \$100,000 showed what this yearly event could be: a true Festival of World Music and Dance. Still, even without that additional funding, thankfully, many of the groups brought their own musicians. Their contribution to a genre of dance that thrived before anybody had invented the loudspeaker cannot be overestimated.

With its tradition of open auditions, the Festival has sometimes had a difficult time deciding between the elastic demands of a “balanced” program and the necessity for “quality” dancing. This has led to young performers being chosen who belonged on school stages not in a professional theater.

Ten-year old Bharata Natyam dancer Athira Pratap was not one of them. She impressed because of her solidly focused training and the clarity of the goal towards which she was striving. This was a young dancer worth watching.

Two other groups were not up to the Festival performance standards. Presidio Dance Theatre's "Ukrainian Suite: Girl Dance and Hopak" was clumsily structured and given a barely adequate recital performance. In the "Russian Sailor Dance" the technical capacities of Mountian International Dance Company's five boys-- one of them a teenager--were ill-matched. Their athleticism looked forced; some lacked the requisite stamina for those bravura leaps, and there is something called stage presence, which has to be learned as well. The audience, however, loved them.

In this year's line-ups you couldn't miss the long-standing groups, some now in the second or third generation. These artists present traditions no longer strange and exotic; watching them is to be aware of change within the familiar. The Murphy Irish Dancers, bobbing curls and pointed feet, marvelously premiered a story about love, an ancient king and St. Patrick. As always they performed with a spirit of joyous discipline and communal engagement. A different interpretation of those qualities was found in Te Mana O Te Ra's "Tani e Pahu." These courting dances from French Polynesia gradually grew hotter as whole community of women in vigorously trembling raffia skirts supported two soloists in pretty sexy spooning gyrations.

Some of Gamelan Sekar Jaya's female dancers lacked upper body liquidity in the ceremonial "Subak" but the choreography's pictorial quality and, above all, the music's deep toned resonance—played live on the bamboo marimbas of the gamelan jegog-- was utterly mesmerizing. Always a big hit with the audience, the all-male Barbary Coast Cloggers did what they do so well: Appalachian precision clogging. However, they made me wonder whether their line, interlocking and circle patterns could not be stretched and still stay within confines of the tradition.

Two soloists and two groups—from the eighteen I saw in two concerts—stood out. Sri Susilowati, an Indonesian dancer in the Sudanese tradition, choreographed and performed the quietly flowing "Jaipong Tablo" (mourning dance) which needed only one thing, live music. The work was intimate and reserved, but the canned music became a one-way street for the dancer. With small steps on the outside of the foot, or planting herself solidly, Susilowati shifted planes with her arms that would shoot out or frame her face, fingers stretched back to the outmost. At times, the dancer seemed almost frozen in grief but at least once she exploded into a flurry of complex emotions.

Another solo, "Contratiempo" by Yaelisa of Caminos Flamenco, also drew attention through the power of stillness. Accompanied by an original score, performed by guitarist extraordinaire Jason McGuire and palmista Melissa Cruz, the work reminded us of Flamenco as a dance of intense internal focus. Starting almost imperceptively, her heels barely talking to the guitar, Yaelisa kept her body very still except for the arms that shaped the space around her, trying to find release in exquisitely restless fingers. Moving into a more percussive section, she intricately played her feet against each other. Yet she never played to the audience, for much of the time she even danced with her back towards us.

Nirmala Madhava choreographed "Sankashta Ganapati" for her Pampa dance school students. Ensemble choreography in Bharata Natyam often serves to highlight individual dancers. Here the dancers moved as a single unit. Identical deep apricot costumes underlined the performers common purpose. The work devolved along spacious lines and clear configurations, showing well placed feet and arms. Unisons, when immaculately performed, have the capacity to mesmerize. Such was the case here. The dance, with Madhava as the fulcrum, honored the elephant god Ganesh who made a charming appearance at the end. Had the music been live, the work would have been even richer.

El Tunante focuses its efforts on the marinera, Peru's national dance which exists in many regional variations. This year, this excellent company of four, with two musicians and the formidable Maria Marchena on vocals, performed one from the North. With the men in boots, capes and big hats, the women barefoot, protective shawls but huge flirtatious skirts, the dance is one big seduction. Having the men in heels—with brilliantly percussive zapateo—and the women exposing vulnerable feet, set up an a priori sexual tension. The handkerchiefs may serve as the obvious tool of flirtation. But these wonderful seductions came through the feet--in the sliding walks, the explosions of footwork or the leaning turns and reaches on half toe. The dancers teased each other but they also slyly seduced the audience.

Photo: El Tunante

by RJ Muna

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