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## Review Of Marche Des Arts Du Spectacle Africain (Masa '97)

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Review

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**MARCHE DES ARTS DU SPECTACLE  
AFRICAIN (MASA '97).** Abidjan, Ivory Coast.  
2–8 March 1997.

What is the place of African culture(s) in the world of contemporary dance and theatre in Africa? What is the relationship for performers between the mastery of the traditional vocabularies and forms of their own ethnic groups and the use of techniques from other cultures? These were two of the central questions debated during MASA '97, the third edition of this biannual crossroads for African performing arts. A panoply of over fifty dance, music, and theatre events from twenty African countries was performed at seven different venues, including indoor and outdoor theatres, clubs, concert halls, courtyards, gardens, and a sports stadium. Daily seminars and meetings for participating artists, press, and presenters from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States were also part of the festival.

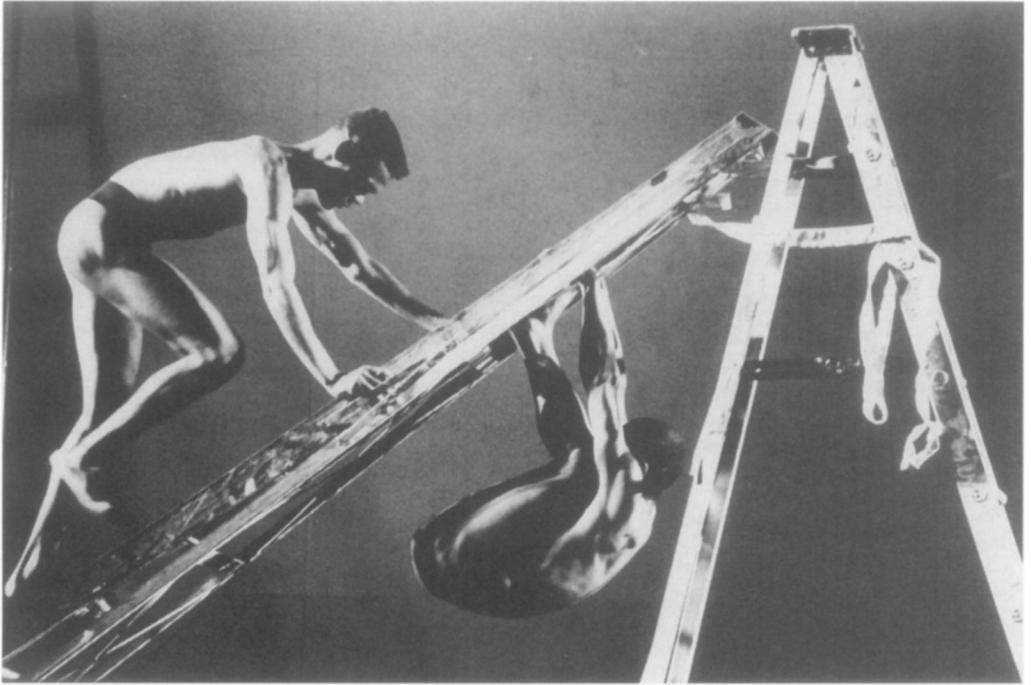
The dance and theatre performances at MASA showcased material from sixteen countries and revealed that approaches to contemporary performance in Africa vary widely. The composite nature of African performance practice has always been evident, with dance, music, and theatre intermingling. It is common—even imperative—for performers to be conversant in all three disciplines. While some works were narrative and linear, others created a collage, alternating abstract and narrative elements. Subject matter included such diverse themes as the plight of urban African street people, a child's struggle to restore harmony in her family, and a mother's lament regarding the losses of war. The works shown by three companies in particular were linked by linear narrative structures and performance time (each lasted about one hour). They also shared an integration of traditional and contemporary dance and theatre vocabularies, fairly extensive reliance on set, lighting, costume, and, in one case, video elements. The performers' skills in at least two of three disciplines (dance, music, and theatre) were called upon in each of these pieces.

The Tunisian company known as Théâtre Organique presented *Tyours Ellil/ Night Birds*. This trio for two women and one man unfolded in a simple but suggestive setting: around a phone booth and under a street lamp at night on a narrow city thoroughfare. The story traced the love/hate relationships among a mother, father, stepmother, and daughter. Slipping seamlessly between danced and acted segments, images accrued rapidly—in turn kind, cruel, sensual, or elegiac. Movement, song, violin playing, and short spoken dialogues combined to pose a poignant question about family

betrayal: we share space and time, but do we really communicate? Théâtre Organique's emphasis on physical theatre techniques which yield violent imagery paralleled that of a number of avant-garde companies in Asia, Europe, and the United States.

The Moroccan company Ballet-Théâtre Zinou presented *Psyché Ou La Légende D'Adonis*, a revisiting of the Adonis legend in which the balletic movement vocabulary and neoclassical choreographic techniques were interspersed with scenes in which a narrator alternated the words of Arab poets with riffs on his soprano saxophone. His relationship to the dancers vacillated from puppet master to wry commentator. The layering of movement with verbal and musical "stories" was further enriched by a video featuring several of the principal dancers that played periodically on a scrim behind the dance. This video mixed abstract imagery with brief narrative episodes (such as one in which the principal male or female dancer walked into the sea while carrying a suitcase). Each of these devices emphasized some aspect of or commented on the legend. Three characters were pivotal to the success of the work: the narrator, the principal male dancer who represented Adonis, and the principal female dancer who represented the scarlet anemone, the flower begot by the death of Adonis. The dancers in this company were well-schooled in ballet. The narrator was an actor/musician whose chameleon-like persona was well-crafted. The use of physical theatre techniques and a combination of ballet, jazz, and folk dance movement challenged the ensemble. While the thread of the choreography was clear and its execution competent, judicious editing could have increased its impact.

Burkina Faso's contribution was "Le Siècle Des Fous," a trio choreographed by Salia Sanou, a policeman from the capital city of Ouagadougou. Though occasionally raw in choreographic craft, this piece was one of the most exciting of those presented due to its successful fusion of traditional African vocabularies with contemporary Western dance and theatre techniques. In essence a duet for two men with a smaller role for a woman, the trio mixed movement Western audiences might classify as physical theatre, contact improvisation, and stage combat, with bursts of traditional dancing and the evocative use of a simple set (a ladder, lanterns, some cloth). The "tale" focused on a few of the personal and societal conflicts undermining life in Burkina Faso during the 1990s. The aural environment for the piece included recorded natural sounds (rain, crickets) along with synthesized ones and beautifully performed Mandinka music played on traditional instruments (kora, flute, and



Members of Tumbuka of Zimbabwe performing in *Pride*. Marche des Arts du Spectacle Africain (MASA '97). Photo uncredited.

guimbe). The musicians moved and played, with their bodies contributing another layer to the danced narrative. Transitions between sections of the work were magical, relying on subtle changes of light and complete physical commitment by all the performers to a series of simple and haunting tableaux.

Two other dance groups of particular interest were from Zimbabwe and South Africa. These companies, the most enthusiastically received at the festival, shared a number of things: a commitment to work that addressed issues of social concern, performers who were physically adept and daring, a strong sense of ensemble, and choreography that drew on traditional African and Western contemporary dance languages that were both technically demanding and sophisticated. Jazz Art, a modern dance company from Cape Town, South Africa, founded approximately twenty years ago, was the most polished of all those I saw both in terms of choreography and in relation to the maturity of its performers.

The director of Jazz Art is Alfred Hinkel, a white South African in his fifties whose years as an artist and an apartheid resister have helped hone his character. Spare, quiet, he gestured and spoke with

passion and clarity. Associated with Jazz Art since 1982, Hinkel became director in 1986. During an interview, he pointed out to me that he doesn't see himself as a choreographer, but rather as a director, editor, and teacher. He characterized most of the company's work as a melange of dance, song, acting, and instrumental music, the blend of which he suggested is what African performance is all about. He also pointed out, "Although I work in dance, what interests me is human beings and politics. I work in dance because dance is political. Our bodies show most clearly who we are, what we eat, and what culture we practice."

While Jazz Art has been a mixed race company since its inception, under Hinkel's direction it became more politicized. In 1986 the company began to practice non-collaboration. This meant a refusal to access sources of funding which were a result of apartheid practices. From then until Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the company's survival depended on support they obtained networking with antigovernment cultural bodies. The majority of that funding came from Sweden and supported the company's teaching mixed-race classes for children as well as their organizing strike workers in and outside of South Africa. At



one point finances were so strained that Hinkel, five dancers, and two dogs lived in the company studio in order to conserve the funds needed to continue their work. Once Mandela was released, their fortunes changed dramatically and they were sought after by presenters and arts boards who realized that both policies and art works would have to become more inclusive. Currently the company's principal work is with children, performing for approximately one hundred thousand per year in the streets and schools. Their intent is to empower black children to stay in school and to use dance in mixed-race classes as a means of fostering knowledge of and respect for others. This visit to MASA marked their first appearance at an international conference. Previously it was necessary to reserve all company resources for political work within South Africa.

All of this was strongly resonant in a work performed to Ravel's *Bolero* in which the eight member company was provocatively clad in costumes of chains and black leather, netting, and see-through plastic. Alternately wearing gum boots and dancing barefoot, they moved eloquently through a kaleidoscope of solos, duets, and ensemble sections. The quilt of ballet, jazz, post-modern, and traditional South African dance vocabularies formed an aggregate that challenged the audience both to see the MTV stereotypes suggested by the company's attire and to look beyond them to consider issues of race and gender. When these exhilarating performers brought the audience to its feet, the applause was clearly for superb technique(s), the ferocity and sense of community with which they danced, and the ways they claimed and fused sensuality and physical daring. The images of confrontation, domination, and seduction this dancing created have multiple readings in relation to Africa as a whole, and to the recent history of South Africa in particular.

If Jazz Art's concert was thought-provoking, the performance by Tumbuka, a company from Zimbabwe that was established in 1990, was electrifying. Tumbuka takes its name from the Shona word meaning to flower or bloom. This group of ten young dancers lived up to the optimism inherent in that name. Composed predominantly of dancers who were members of the first training program created by the National Ballet of Zimbabwe for youth from the black townships, Tumbuka is the country's only professional modern dance company. Their concert opened with "Pride," a high-energy work for male company members in which arresting athletic partnering and a blend of movement from sports, ballet, and various street dance vocabularies conveyed the comradery and compe-

titution often present in a gang. In "... And Rwanda," seven black men and one white woman hurtled through space attacking and supporting one another in mock battle. A grueling pace, twisted extensions, and aggressive partnering conveyed the chaotic cyclone of war. Later, when Leigh Sanders was asked during our interview how it was to be white and a woman in this dance, she replied, "So many women are involved in warfare in Zimbabwe, in other African countries and, in fact, around the world. We're not representing the experience of one gender or race, but a global situation."

The frenzy of "... And Rwanda" captured only one aspect of the company's strength. In another work there was subtle and quiet mystery. As "Solo for a Street Child" began, a dancer sat down stage right playing the mbira softly, as if whispering to a friend. The curtain opened to reveal a thin stream of water falling steadily into a circle around which a young man walked cautiously, as if balancing on a curb. The stage, lit at first in cool blue, gradually warmed and lightened into the day, while the dancer, still circling, began to scoop water into his hand. As he improvised in and out of the growing stream, splashing, rolling in, and dodging the water, his playfulness increased. His body softened; the mbira melody called and supported him. He responded, sliding and singing (or perhaps simply laughing). As the lights faded the sounds of the music and the falling water continued.

The performances and discussions at MASA made it clear that questions about heritage, integration of cultures, politics, sexuality, sensuality, alienation, and love are all being posed by choreographers, directors, and performers throughout Africa. Increasingly, the resulting work honors yet transcends individual traditions. The artists are creating mixed media, multidisciplinary pieces that reflect both their unique African origin and an engagement with postmodern practice. Writing by African authors concerned with both the processes and impact of these works is just beginning to appear. There is obviously much potential work to be done analyzing and recording the histories of such individuals and companies, as well as more broad-ranging investigations into the ways, for example, that various works have been used to support and/or subvert various political and social agendas. It is an active and significant time for African performance, and hopefully also for new scholarship devoted to it.

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