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Out of the Fog: The First Installment

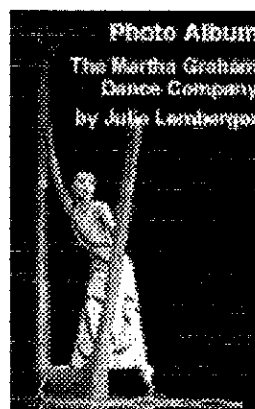
Tap, Tap.... Who's there? Glover, Smith, Das and Dorfman

By Aimee Ts'ao

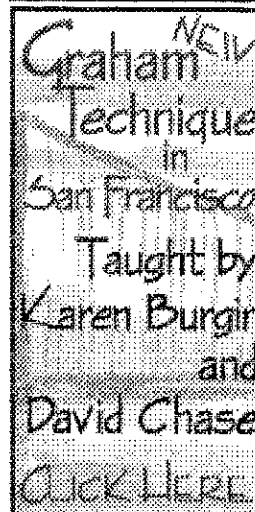
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SAN FRANCISCO -- After publishing very infrequent reviews on the Dance Insider over the past couple of years, I am very happy to be coming back, for what will hopefully be a long run of weekly reporting from Fog City, a.k.a. San Francisco. Not "Big Dog City" as the red taxi-cabs (belonging to a fleet of the same name) roaming our streets might lead you to believe. Why San Francisco for a weekly bulletin? Because the Bay Area has the second largest dance community in the country after New York. And a lot of very good companies include it on their list of touring destinations -- often premiering work here before it reaches New York. I have hopes that some of you remember me and my reviews. If not, you can use the [search feature](#) to find out what I used to be up to and perhaps be inspired to check in every week to see what I'm musing over at the moment.

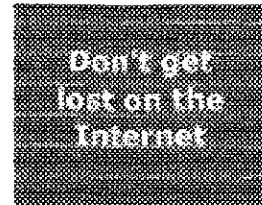
I am emerging from the fog on more than one level, literally and figuratively. In two words: sleep apnea. Don't ask; it's complicated and, in my case, involves a car accident and an eviction, too. But if you snore a lot and feel exhausted all the time, get thee to an otolaryngologist post-haste. As one friend pointed out to me, there is a reason why they use sleep deprivation in torture and brainwashing. Think "Manchurian Candidate" and you'll get a glimpse into the bizarre mental landscape of those chronically short on shut-eye. What a relief to discover that I wasn't continually drifting off during



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performances due to chronic boredom. For once, I had a good reason and it had nothing to do with the show I was seeing or that I was soooo jaded.



David Dorfman Dance brought its director's latest work "Underground" to Yerba Buena Center for the Arts September 21-24, for its second showing after an American Dance Festival premiere last June. I caught the company September 23 in this 50-minute piece inspired by the recent Sam Green documentary, "The Weather Underground" (2002). We stayed for the Q & A and then retired to a local brew-pub to discuss it. Of course, my friends wanted to know what I thought, being the critic and all, but, being a critic, I wanted to know what they thought. It was much better than I expected it to be. Usually I find politically motivated art to be pedantic, didactic and reeking of agit-prop, but in "Underground" the words and video were integrated relatively smoothly, though the most powerful moments were still the ones using movement, as strongly executed by these very able dancers.

But I mostly wanted to ask questions: though the Weatherman were mostly white middle-class young people, is there any reason for this dance company to also be all white? (Color-blind casting has been around for a while now -- I just saw an African-American in the role of Tristan Tzara in Tom Stoppard's "Travesties" at the American Conservatory Theater.) In fact, one dancer in the Q & A even said that as the performer who asked the questions in one section, his being the tallest white male in the company helped him to wield the authority that the role conferred. For me, the broader issues involving politics and art are perhaps beyond the scope of "Underground." I would be curious to explore how the socio-politico-economic climate in which an artist lives ultimately determines what s/he is capable of creating either as a choreographer or an interpreter of various types of roles. Currently I am reading "I, Maya Plisetskaya," in which the Russian ballerina assoluta describes her childhood survival through her father's arrest and execution, her mother's imprisonment, then exile, and the Second World War. Dancing classical ballet, retreating into a world of fairy tales and myths was the way she could escape the unimaginably brutal realities of her daily life. Perhaps as our society leans farther and farther toward totalitarianism (if we aren't already there!) we will find people more and more interested in escapism, rather than wanting to engage in political confrontation. Or maybe this is why Disney continues to be so successful.

It's always a good idea to take an expert with you when reviewing a style of dance in which you aren't thoroughly versed. So when I found out I was going to see "Classical Savion" performed by tapper Savion Glover, who better to ask to accompany me than Bessie Award-winning tap dancer Sam Weber? (Disclaimer: Sam and I have been friends since 1985 when we performed in "The Nutcracker" with Peninsula Ballet Theater.) Weber's been tapping since he was a kid, also doing ballet, and has a keen mind that is worth mining for both tap trivia and the broader picture, the history of tap. On August 19 at the Herbst Theater, at his latest appearance in the 2nd annual San Francisco Tap Festival's culminating performance, "Rhythm Exchange," he danced a level above everyone else. Between a lightness on his feet that makes you think he is floating and has to stretch his feet down to connect with the stage, and an intensely complex mix of rhythms and large range of tap tones, he is indeed one of the most elegant and polished tap dancers I've ever seen.

Until I went to see "Indian Jazz Suites," a collaboration between Kathak master Chitresh Das and Emmy-winning tap dancer Jason Samuels Smith which played recently at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, I was going to make Glover the focus of this column. Seeing both these performances brought up a lot of ideas concerning the differences and similarities of various forms of dance AND music. Throw in a phone interview with Mark Morris (more on that next week) in which we discussed the commitment to using live music, and it became clear that I had a vital topic to discuss.

On Friday, September 22, I arrive at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley for "Classical Savion" with private tutor Mr. Weber close at hand. The premise of the idea, Glover says in the program notes, is that classical music is "just the next thing on the list for me to attack in terms of music." We have seats in the third row on the right, which means at least we can see really well. This is important as this theater seems cavernous at times, especially when there is only one dancer on stage, even with his band, The Otherz, who will be performing the music, both classical and jazz.

Opening with three-quarters of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" -- Summer, Autumn and Winter -- I quickly discover that there are major problems looming ahead. Glover's tapping is over-amplified, or from the other point of view, the music isn't amplified enough. Adding the incredible reverberation of the wooden platform he's dancing on to the imbalance between tapping and instruments, we have an unbearable Tower of Babel. I strain to catch bits and pieces of the Vivaldi, which I

fortunately know well enough to fill in the considerable gaps. At least I have some idea what Glover's intentions are through the muddy sounds. When I can hear it, the interplay between the music and his tapping are quite good.

Fortunately, Glover requests that the mikes for the dance platform be turned off for the finale section of "Dvorak's String Quartet, No. 12 in F major, Op.96, Vivace ma non troppo." Now I can really get a feeling for what he is doing. He plays off the music in his own idiosyncratic way. He is not a slave to it, but on the contrary, uses the classical rhythms as a jumping off point for his own imagination to take flight.

After a brief pause, with the mikes now in slightly better balance, he is back with two Bach pieces, the third "Brandenburg Concerto in G major, BWV 1048" and the second "Orchestral Suite in B minor, BWV 1067." I can't help but remember that in the Baroque era much of the music was written with figured bass, allowing the musicians to improvise within a certain harmonic structure. So why not take things a step further and modulate the rhythmic structure as well? And so Glover does to great effect.

The acoustic problems re-emerge during the Shostakovich, the second and third movements, the Allegro Molto and the Allegretto of his "String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110." One moment clear, the next totally muddy, switching back and forth the whole way through. Despite this flaw, I am surprised that it works as well as it does. Even more intriguing are the interchanges between foot percussionist Glover and the strings in the Pe loc from Bartok's "Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 68, BB76." The last classical piece before the orchestra moves on to jazz, the third and fourth movements from Mendelssohn's "Octet for Strings in E-flat major, Op. 20, Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo and Presto," is a disappointing free-for-all with too much stomping.

The second half of the evening is really where everyone shines. The acoustics are good and the format of having each musician solo with Glover allows us to see their intimate process of listening and responding to each other. Unfortunately, since the musicians in his band, The Otherz, are all introduced from the stage and their names are not listed in the program, I cannot even credit these very talented players. They wrap up with Glover's own arrangement of Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever 4 Now."

It is a very long evening, too long, in fact, with no intermission and Sam says that Glover avoids being too showy in his moves

as he knows he has to stay on top of his game for more than two hours. I would have been satisfied with a shorter program in any case. During the drive back to San Francisco I pick Sam's brain and ask questions ad infinitum. I comment that the one thing I love is that Glover has a rapturous expression on his face much of the time, as if nothing exists except for the music and his dancing. Weber says that this is a real contrast to his earlier days when he seemed to be angry much of the time.

I am also interested in Glover's tap lineage -- which "school" of tapping he comes from. In ballet, dancers can come from the general categories of Russian, French, English, or Italian training. Modern dancers trace their heritage to one or more of the great teachers or choreographers: Graham, Humphrey, Limon, Cunningham, Dunham, Horton, Taylor, et cetera. Glover it seems is mostly influenced by Gregory Hines and his list of heroes includes, among others: Hines, Sammy Davis Jr., Jimmy Slyde, Lon Chaney, Diane Walker, Honi Coles and Chuck Green. But the most important aspect of Glover's work is that he has profoundly changed the younger generation of tappers, beginning with his Tony Award-winning choreography for "Bring in ÔDa Noise, Bring in ÔDa Funk."

I also learn that Glover thinks of himself as a percussionist and he often, as I have just witnessed, spends much of a concert with his back to the audience, in order to have eye contact with the musicians he is playing with, instead of playing to the spectators.

A week later, Saturday, September 30 I am at the final performance of a three-day international festival and symposium, "Kathak at the Crossroads, Innovation Within Tradition" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Kathak, one of the six major classical dance forms from India, is divided into two main gharanas (schools): Lucknow, which emphasizes the dramatic and sensual, and Jaipur, which stresses its purely technical demands. The first performer, Rajendra Gangani, a proponent of the Jaipur gharana, opens with a dance that shows his technical prowess. Then he begins a long series of improvisations with the musicians. Next is Saswati Sen, of the Lucknow gharana, telling a story with her hands and arms. She then also counts out long rhythmic phrases for the musicians, who play them back to her while she dances. This interchange between dancer and musician is the basis of Indian music and dance, as it also is in flamenco. Essentially, the music is dance and the dance is music.

After the intermission, Chitresh Das, a true master, completely

overwhelms me with his solo. His perfection of form, coupled with a transcendent stage presence, makes for an unforgettable performance, easily one of the most thrilling I've ever seen. He is ageless, vital, even youthfully energetic. An almost equally impressive solo by Jason Samuels Smith and his homage to Pegleg Bates is followed by "Indian Jazz Suites," a piece beyond imagining. The two men, Das 62 years old and Smith 26, combine their prodigious talents in an amazing mix of hip-hop, jazz, tap, and Kathak. The only difference between them is that Das does it all in bare feet! The permutations and combinations of Indian musicians, the Marcus Shelby Trio playing jazz, Smith in tap shoes and Das with nothing but ankle bells cannot be described. At one point Das is playing tabla while dancing and singing, Das and Smith exchange rhythms as in a friendly competition and then everyone is riffing off of each other. They get an instant standing ovation. Of note is the fact that the Kathak dancers all spoke of their gurus either verbally or in the program and Smith listed both his teachers and influential tap dancers from the stage. How nice to have those lineages publically and gratefully acknowledged!

I go home with much food for thought. More questions. Why in more traditional Western dance forms has the music become less important? How often do we have live music? For me, music and dance are so intertwined that I cannot really bear to have one without the other. A dance concert with recorded music is a bit like Romeo dragging Juliet's lifeless body around. There needs to be the spontaneous give and take between music and dance. Even when the music is played from a set score, each playing varies and so the dancers must listen and respond to the version they are hearing in that moment. This is what raises a performance to another level. And that is why I applaud Mark Morris for making a commitment to using live music. In our increasingly technological world, a place where people seem less and less able to communicate with each other without electronic mediation, we must keep our very souls alive by insisting on connecting through these very ancient and utterly human art forms.

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