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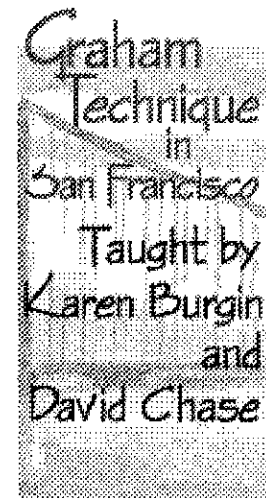
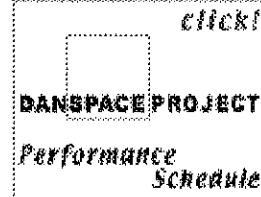
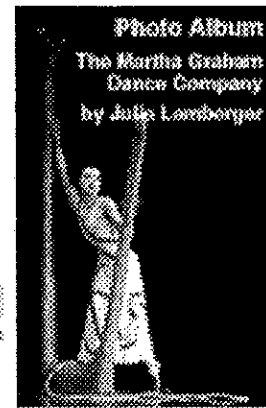
Out of the Fog, 10-20: Local Color
Smuin's Samba; Gamelan Gambit

By [Aimee Ts'ao](#)

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Friday, October 6 I find myself at the Palace of Fine Arts Theater for the opening night of the Smuin Ballet's fall season. I am anticipating seeing Ikolo Griffin, who recently joined the company after a career with the San Francisco Ballet, the Dance Theatre of Harlem first as a soloist then principal dancer, and most recently as a principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet. I am also curious to see the revival of artistic director Michael Smuin's "Shinju" and the premiere of company member Amy Seiwert's "Revealing the Bridge." The ensemble is full of talented and exciting performers, so I know I will enjoy that aspect of the evening at the very least.

Breaking my own rule about never reading program notes before watching a dance concert -- the choreography itself should reveal through the steps and composition what a work is about, without the need for a written explanation -- I read that Seiwert's inspiration for this ballet is Monet's "The Japanese Bridge." He painted this bridge, which graces his garden at his home in Giverny, many times, over many years, in styles from Impressionistic to abstract. Had I not read all this, I might have assumed on viewing that the work is a particularly well-crafted abstract neo-classical ballet, set to Michael Nyman's "String Quartet, No. 2." Despite deftly handling the tricky meter changes, Seiwert has not created a movement vocabulary that is particularly individual or innovative, though it is quite nicely danced with clean lines and good attack. Jessica Touchet



makes the most of her solos, turning and jumping with great aplomb and musicality. The sections for a man in a modern style are more interesting, but don't seem to fit in the rest of the context. The bridge is never fully revealed; perhaps there are hints, but the connection between the two different styles, or the evolution from one to the other, and how they are meant to relate to each other, is still shrouded in the mist at Giverny.



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"Shinju" is arguably Smuin's best piece of choreography. I also saw it performed by San Francisco Ballet a few years after its 1975 premiere, and after more than 30 years it certainly passes the test of time quite admirably. The story, based on an ancient Japanese legend, is both romantic and tragic. The two lovers can never join their lives together as the man is already married; the extreme formality of Japanese culture finally dictates the only solution they feel possible under the circumstances. Paul Chihara's score uses both the ancient music of the Japanese court with modern Western orchestration and an electronic score. This work is one of the few in which Smuin has developed a choreographic language unique to the specific ballet he's making and consistently employed it throughout. The simplicity of line and compositional form echo the Japanese esthetic, making the final tragedy all the more horrific in contrast. Vanessa Thiessen and James Strong as the lovers articulate the necessary restrained passion, while the entire company provides a supportive theatrical backdrop.

The final piece of the evening is the premiere of Smuin's "Obrigado, Brazil," (that's 'thank you, Brazil' in Portugese) to the music of various composers, all recorded by Yo-Yo Ma with an assortment of what I assume are musicians from Brazil. Griffin opens the ballet with a spectacular jump over a chair and never lets up. He has the overwhelming warmth of the tropical sun with the intense technical clarity of a laser. While most of the numbers in this ballet feel like the classical ballet steps are shoe-horned into the Brazilian rhythms, the exuberant dancers don't let minor details like that stop them and give their all. The peak comes with the duet "1 x 0 (Um a Zero)" featuring Thiessen and Griffin, and it's perfect, choreographically and artistically. Both dancers nail the speedy choreography and split-second partnering without batting an eye, provide the right nuance -- a glance here, a shoulder there -- and have a riveting rapport as well. In less than half an hour Thiessen has gone impressively from cool understated desire to sizzling allure. Who knows how much more I would have enjoyed this piece with a Latin music combo playing in the corner of the stage?

Yikes! That ugly beast of using recorded music raises its head once more. (Or has it become the dead horse you wish I would

stop flogging?) Of course, recorded music can be the inspiration for a ballet, but why stop there, why not seek out a live performing group in the same style? I am also aware that having live music for a dance concert can be expensive, but perhaps we need to reorder our priorities. A small ensemble of three musicians could probably be had for the cost of a full-page ad in the major newspaper, or the expense could be included in a grant application or a request to donors to underwrite that portion of a new production.

Mark Morris has made a commitment to using live music. (For his commentary on live performance, [click here](#).) After spending three years as the resident choreographer at the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels Morris realized that he didn't need to put up with inadequate rehearsal space, lack of basic amenities for the dancers (showers, dressing rooms) and no live music. If the American government wasn't going to subsidize the arts to the extent that the Belgian one did, he decided that he would figure out how to raise the money here to insure that his company could have the necessary resources to continue creating his new work without everyone sacrificing everything for the sake of art. As he told me in a recent telephone interview, he now has a gorgeous new arts center in Brooklyn, where every dance class, from those for 5-year-olds to the ones for professionals, in all assorted styles, has live music.

There are also ways to be creative in reallocating available funds. Let your imagination go wild and come up with a new paradigm. An extremely culturally knowledgeable friend of mine said to me that one of the big reasons musicians don't go to dance concerts is because the music is usually canned. Maybe if dancers went more often to live music concerts instead of dance concerts with dead music, they would be inspired to find a way to include it. More people in the audience might even be encouraged to see more dance if they knew they would be getting some aural satisfaction in addition to more vibrant interactive performances on stage. People go to see live theater and dance and to hear live music -- and are willing to pay more for it -- because film, video, and recording do not do those art forms justice. There is no experience that can equal being in the presence of live performance. Putting two forms together is not an additive process. It's like squaring each one separately and then multiplying the two results. That makes for gestalt on steroids.

A week after the Smuin concert got me hopping once more up on my soapbox to proselytize the virtues of live music, on Saturday, October 14, I'm back at Zellerbach Hall for the

premiere of "Kali Yuga: The Age of Chaos," performed by Gamelan Sekar Jaya and co-presented by Cal Performances and World Arts West. (Cal Performances not only presents national and international performing arts groups, but also includes Bay Area groups on its concert series. World Arts West is the presenter/producer of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, now in its 29th year. Both groups run extensive educational outreach programs, primarily targeting schoolchildren.)

The Bay Area is very fortunate to have this Balinese music and dance troupe, nay, institution, working here for the past 28 years. Not only does this group preserve the traditional repertoire, but it is actively engaged in creating innovative work, such as "Kali Yuga." It has become so successful that it is considered an active participant in the evolution of Balinese music and dance and in 2000 was given the "Dharma Kusuma," Bali's highest award for artistic achievement, never before bestowed on a foreign group.

The term 'Kali Yuga' refers to the fourth and final Hindu Age of Humanity, which is characterized by destruction, struggle and chaos. Many believe that this is the state of our world today. In an artistic response to several bombings in southern Bali, one in 2002, the others in 2005, where more than 200 died and thousands were injured, and to worldwide violence in general, Gamelan Sekar Jaya made "Kali Yuga: The Age of Chaos." The piece is an attempt to reconcile the gradual infiltration of foreign culture into Bali that led to conflict, the near collapse of the local society -- spiritually, emotionally and economically -- as a result of the bombings, and hopes for peace. Of the many artists who worked on this production, the key players are: Ellen Sebastian Chang, direction; I Wayan Dibia, choreography, with additional choreography by I Ketut Rina and Tjokorda Istri Putra Padmini; Goenawan Mohamed, poetry; Wayne Vitale and I Made Arnawa, music; Elaine Buckholtz, visual and set design; Jack Carpenter, lighting design; and Jay Cloidt, sound design.

According to Dudley Brooks, an ex-Alwin Nikolais dancer who plays in the gamelan orchestra, the music is roughly one-third traditional Balinese, one-third contemporary Balinese by Vitale, an American, and one-third contemporary Balinese by the Balinese I Made Arnawa. The dancing is also a mixture. Tjokorda Isteri Putra Padmini, I Ketut Rina and I Wayan Dibia perform in the Balinese style, while Rashidi Omari Byrd does his Hip-Hop moves and a corps of nightclub dancers writhe to the disco beat.

While the story-line is moving and shows the complexity of the

confrontation between traditional values and the encroaching modern foreign lifestyle, the juxtaposition of the opposing dance styles is too jarring. Instead of the actual theatrical presentation of "Kali Yuga" successfully delivering its message, ironically, it is this extreme contrast of styles that actually serves to show how it is ultimately impossible to integrate these cultures.

The three lead dancers are utterly superb. Tjokorda Isteri Putra Padmini, as Dewi Sri, the Goddess of Rice, masterfully uses her hands and face most expressively. I Ketut Rina, as the evil Bursasana, is a truly wild man, seething with rage and embodying negativity. But the real tour de force is I Wayan Dibia's portrayal of the Man with Four Faces. As he puts on one mask after another, he completely alters his body language to suit each character -- a bold prince, an old man, a vain woman and a clown.

"Kali Yuga" is not an unqualified success, but it contains so many truly fine elements that it is a deeply satisfying evening. At least it proves my point that any show with live music is already far ahead of a performance with recorded music.

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