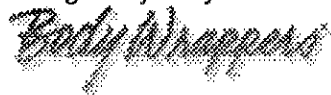




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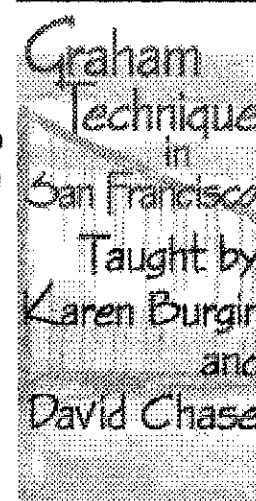
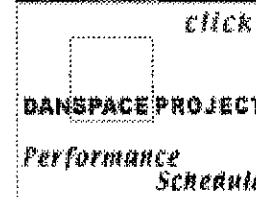
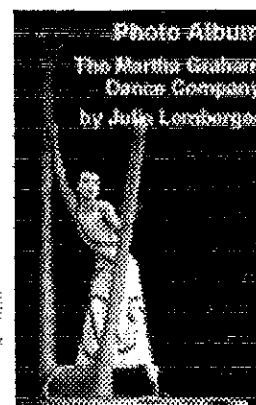
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Out of the Fog, 12-13: Conjunction Junction
Compagnie TcheTche Misses the Overarching

By Aimee Ts'ao
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SAN FRANCISCO – In a few more minutes, if you keep on reading, you will probably start thinking "There she goes again, off on some political tangent." Dance does not exist in a vacuum and it never reaches the stage without some form of politics either helping or hindering the process of reaching an audience. This can come from patrons, as in the old days with Louis XIV and the Russian Tsars or in more recent times with Lincoln Kirstein, Bathsheba de Rothschild, and Lucia Chase; governmental organizations charged with allocating public funds, such as the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts; or from non-governmental organizations and foundations, such as the Ford Foundation or Philip Morris/Altria. So it is appropriate to consider broader connections, as I do from time to time, today in reflecting on a performance of the African dance ensemble Compagnie TcheTche, seen December 2 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum.

Globalization is a word that has come to have mostly negative connotations. Yet it all depends on which side you are standing. In terms of economics, the creation of jobs and the resulting improvement in quality of life for those in developing countries is a good thing. The loss of jobs and declining economic health in the already developed ones is not. The exploitation of people, through multinational corporate greed on both sides of this seesaw is appalling. Globalization can also mean the exposure of First World culture to the Third World and vice versa via radio,



television and the Internet, a mixed blessing as far as I can tell. The word assimilation is also a double-edged blade. Immigrants trying to integrate themselves into a new culture in order to feel accepted and gain some economic ground also pay a price sometimes, though not always, by losing their own traditions and social cohesion.



I like to keep all these ideas in mind when going to see dance that is a fusion of traditional indigenous forms and Western European ones. Cross-pollination of all the performing arts forms -- music, dance, theater -- has been going on for millennia, since the earliest humans encountered cultures different from their own. This process often came about along trade routes or as the result of military invasions. Until recently when travel became relatively rapid (thanks to trains and airplanes), this melding of cultures was quite gradual, taking generations instead of months or years.

And finally before we get to the show at hand, I feel obliged to disclose that on the day of Compagnie TcheTche's concert I woke up with a horrendous head cold. That alone would have been a great excuse, but I also sat on an arts festival selection panel for 6 ½ hours, viewing more than 50 dance DVDs and videos. No doubt both of these factors influenced my perception of this company's performance.

The evening-length "Dimi" (in English, 'women's sorrow'), choreographed by TcheTche artistic director Beatrice Kombe, succeeds in revealing several layers of culture in regard to the position of women in African society. The most notable example isn't in the piece but in the company itself being composed of four women. Inserted into the program booklet is an interview of Kombe, by Ariel Osterweis Scott, in which the Abidjan, Ivory Coast-based director relates how complicated it was for her, as a woman, to direct the members, especially the men, of the company Lakimado. "There were too many power issues," she explains. In response, she started Compagnie TcheTche with only women.

The strong points of TcheTche are its very personal emotional expression and the sections of traditional Ivorian dance. In the same interview Kombe relates that she has only worked with two non-traditional choreographers, Zab Maboungou and Alphonse Thierou, and these contacts with a different approach to dance triggered the desire to find her own technique, her own language. Given that "Dimi" was her initial work for her new company it would be unfair to judge her progress on the road toward realizing her goal. Had the company performed a recent work I might be able to better assess Kombe's growth as a

choreographer.

In some ways Compagnie TcheTche inevitably makes me think of Ronald K. Brown's rich choreographic amalgam. In fact, it's almost the reverse story -- Brown has developed his own very distinct dance language starting from modern dance, ballet and hip-hop, then incorporating traditional African forms, while Kombe is moving from the traditional forms toward a new vocabulary without the benefit of greater exposure to other forms. Brown has the advantage of using highly trained dancers, both in his own company Evidence and in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the only troupes I have seen perform his choreography. And the level of technique does matter, as I witnessed also with Compagnie Salia ni Seydou from Burkina Faso in 2003, where despite the rambling choreography, I was completely engaged by the performers' powerful stage presence and articulated execution. Not that TcheTche's dancers didn't have their moments, but they lacked a sustained level of intensity in both quiet moments and vigorously physical ones. I did enjoy each performer individually, observing her various facets. What I missed was some overarching structure that brought these four women together consistently, not literally, but artistically for the entire evening.

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