

## DANCE; Where Western Technique and African Wisdom Meet

By ANN MURPHY

ALONZO KING is the latest among a small but growing number of dance makers for whom the stage is a meeting place between African and Western culture. In their work, performance styles mingle and sometimes fuse to create subtly altered forms of ballet and modern dance.

In an ambitious project two years in the making, Mr. King recently brought together 16 singers and dancers from one of the world's last hunter-gatherer tribes in Africa with 11 of his angular neo-Classical dancers from Lines Ballet in his first full-length work, titled "People of the Forest." Mr. King, who danced with Harkness Ballet and whose dances are in the repertoires of companies like Frankfurt Ballet and Dance Theater of Harlem, is noted for his use of live and unusual music, but this is the first time he has undertaken a project of such scale.

The collaboration had a serendipitous beginning. Nancy Martino, the dance curator of San Francisco Performances, saw Nzamba Lela, a group of pygmy singers and dancers from the Ba'Aka clan in the Central African Republic, perform at a festival in the Ivory Coast in February 1999. "She thought of me when she saw them," Mr. King said.

She proposed that the two groups work together, and by April, he was traveling under military escort along dirt roads in the Central African Republic and canoeing down the Ubangi River, the largest tributary of the Congo, to meet Nzamba Lela.

While the countryside was placid, Mr. King found a depressing jumble of Westernization, from McDonald's restaurants to blue jeans to televisions, in the cities. "They want what we have," he said, "while we go there knowing they have something in terms of wisdom that we need."

Mr. King had planned to return last year, but the war in the neighboring Congo had spread north to the Ubangi and the forest where the Ba'Aka live, making the trip impossible. But a meeting of Nzamba Lela and Lines Ballet eventually took place in late September at the Howard Gilman Foundation's 7,500-acre White Oak Plantation in Florida, a former rice plantation that is now home to Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Project.

When not on tour, Nzamba Lela, a group of men and women, many of whom are related, spend part of the year in the village of Mougoumba performing occasional wage labor and part of it in the Ituri rainforest, where they hunt as well as practice song and dance rituals that are believed to be more than 5,000 years old. For "People of the Forest" they brought their mostly vocal music,

with its tales of forest life and rites of passage, ornamented by their undulant, nearly stationary style of movement.

"People of the Forest" begins with "Bokya," the story of pygmies chasing animals into their hunting nets. At first, the stage is empty and saturated in bright golden light, as though to suggest a forest clearing. As the members of Nzamba Lela, dressed in raffia skirts, appear, they cross to the front of the stage, gathering in a corner. Slowly, their voices build into gentle yodeling and dreamy, high-pitched melodies that form a web of irregular harmonies, ornamented by rhythmic clapping. But rather than perform an African dance about the hunt, three ballerinas from Lines cut across the space. As the song continues, it seems as if the pygmies have called forth the dancers. In the same instant the ballerinas appear to be dreaming of the pygmies and their ancient melodies.

Mr. King, a disciple of the yogi Paramahansa Yogananda, finds the crux of the confrontation between Africa and the West in this mirrorlike inversion of realities -- one that reaches back beyond recorded history, the other neo-Classical; one communal and natural, the other individualistic and performance-based.

"It is an encounter of opposites," he said. "Duality is everything, and the attempt to fuse duality is at the heart of human activity."

In contrast, the choreographer Ron Brown, director of the Brooklyn-based company Evidence, who lived in the Ivory Coast in the mid-90's, strives for a synthesis in which patterns of African movement are fused with modern dance forms. He said he was shocked by the corruption in political life there, but at the same time found "a culture of incredible openness that could accept me as a long-lost family member." In the modest home where he stayed, "we all ate out of one bowl," he said, and despite the meager circumstances, "there was never any sense of 'I'm going to get mine and you're in the way.' "

HIS dance "Grace" begins with a solitary figure in a church who performs a modern dance solo full of searching and longing, followed by a sudden explosion of dancers in red joyously crossing the stage in waves that evoke a West African cleansing ritual.

"In Africa," Mr. Brown said, "ritual is the link between generations as well as epochs." He said that such rituals were destroyed for American blacks through slavery and oppression, and as a result he tries to use his dance to create new forms of ritual within the theatrical limits of the West.

The choreographer Ralph Lemon takes a more postmodern approach to his melding of African and Western dance. In 1996, he disbanded his company and made a soul-searching journey to Africa, where it became, as he writes in his memoir, "the source of my finding a new relationship to the stage."

Unlike his colleagues, Mr. Lemon sees Africa and the West not as opposites but as aspects of vast migrations and personal journeys like his own. In "Tree," the second part of a three-part work called "Geography," a dancer from Ghana transplanted to the United States performs the

same movements as an American-born dancer. The steps are identical but the impulses they reflect are different. In Mr. Lemon's view, difference is not only cultural but individual as well.

Mr. King is more concerned with bridging cultures. At a performance of "People of the Forest" last month at the Yerba Buena Theater in San Francisco, part of a just-ended national tour, Nzamba Lela sang and beat their hollowed-out log drums, while the Lines dancers performed their jagged ballet as if in another world. Then in a segment called "Boyouwa," a lament about death, the separation between Ba'Aka and Western realities vanished, as if the ballet dancers and the hunter-gatherers had finally found their meeting place.

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