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## **Whither Are You Heading EDF?**

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival

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Program Four

Palace of Fine Arts

San Francisco, California

by Rita Felciano

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By most measurements, the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, celebrating its 30th anniversary this season, has been a success. It has built a reputation for well-produced, evenhanded shows. Every January a changing set of panelists selects individual artists and companies from open-to-the public auditions. EDF has spun off a well-respected educational series, "People Like Me." A documentary film is in the making. Touring has become a possibility. Most encouragingly, the music component has been vastly improved; much of it is being performed live. These days EDF is almost as much a world music as a world dance festival. (A grant this year brought in guest musicians from around the globe). The commissioning program—to foster re-thinking of traditions—is another positive trend. Ticket sales prove that audiences love their EDF; the shows this year were, apparently, 99% sold out. So what if anything is wrong with this picture?

I saw three of this year's program and felt uneasy at each. But it was the last concert that confirmed suspicions that perhaps some re-thinking might be in order.

The EDF has sprung from supporting community based dance ensembles that often serve their members as a home away from home. Mexican and South Indian groups, for instance, perform important cultural functions for their respective populations. Many of those ensembles grew around master teachers who patiently shape recalcitrant limbs into the refinements of their disciplines. Honoring these achievements has always been an essential ingredient to EDF's mission.

Today some of the artists participating in EDF are as professional as any in their field. But to find 36 first-rate companies—as EDF felt it had to this year—compromises quality. More is not better. It made no sense to have on the same program the distilled beauty of Halau O Keikiali'i's hula with the overly casual frolics of the Hiyas Philippine Folk Dance Company. Nor should Fuego Nuevo Ballet Folklórico Mexicano (including a first rate male a cappella singer) and their crisply musical footwork have had to share billing with the indifferent looking YaoYong Dance and their bombastic music.

Maybe it's time for the producers, World Arts West, to institute a two-tier system along the Ailey II and Paul Taylor II companies in which less experienced dancers can prove themselves before stepping on stage with professional level artists. Or how about shows along specific cultural lines in which there would be room for different levels of achievement?

On the fourth program Halau O Keikiali's kahiko (pre-Western influence) hula served as a reminder of just how valuable EDF is and how good it can be. Powerful singer/drummer, Kawika Keikiali'l Alfiche opened the presentation with what

probably were invocations. As this very large group of multi-aged dancers streamed onto the stage, they became a community engaged in a common purpose. Responding vocally and gesturally to the chanted poetry, forceful but unforced unisons flowed into liquidly evolving patterns. Something like a spiritual hum seemed to settle over them. A male dance was remarkable for its combination of strength and lyricism. But always the dancers' feet connected to the earth, their hips to the sea and their arms to the sky.



A musician, Márcia “Cigarra” Treidler on the berimbau also set the stage for Abadá—Capoeira San Francisco Performance Troupe. Their well-performed “Spirit of Brazil” highlighted the fact that this martial arts/dance genre has become equally popular with men and women. Both aspects of the art were well presented. In the slow close to the ground and horizontal moves the performers look like bottom feeders. But it was the spinning kicks and close encounters of a dangerous kind that elicited gasps in the traditional roda.



New to the Festival was the amiable Turkish CollageWest Dance Theatre who describes what they do as “contemporary folk”. Their “Anatolia” suite consisted of dances from seven of the area's regions. Not surprisingly they were all line dances. Reflecting a modern spirit, men and women wore identically embroidered black pants, the women in red, the men in green vests. Music was taped. The dancing emphasized verticality and precise fast footwork. The twenty-four dancers kept the non-stop patterns of circles, serpentine double lines and stacks going with considerable aplomb. The piece ended with a frontally facing line, hands interlocking, feet clacking. For all the world I expected them to start a Broadway kick line. Though the dancers' relative lack of experience showed in a fairly tense performance, this was a respectable debut.

Chandham Youth Dance Company, a sixteen-member Kathak student group, opened this final anniversary program with “Uttarakaala” (Future). Company founder Chitresh Das, assisted by Company Director Charlotte Moraga, choreographed it. “Uttarakaala's” complexity was challenging but experience-appropriate. Footwork was crisp, lines clean, demeanor both modest and joyous. Some members of the more advance sextet showed promising responses to one of Kathak's exigencies, an individualized rhythmic response to the music. One young dancer beautifully slowed a pirouette only to have it pick up speed again. Another highlighted lyricism over bravura. But these were student performers. Their feet simply didn't have the strength—either as a group or with individuals-- to equally partner the fine musicians which included guest tabla player, Abhijit Banerjee.

Translating popular celebrations from the village square into the theater demands stagecraft and dancerly skills. The dances shouldn't look on stage as if they were more fun to participate in than to watch. In addition to the ever popular, so-so performed “Tinikling,” Hiyas Philippine Folk Dance Company's presented a medley of folkdances, including a crab dance and dances with lanterns and a fish basket. Unfortunately, choreographer Justin Mambaje strung them together rather haphazardly. Additionally, the young dancers' evident enthusiasm did not make up for step executions and

interactions that lacked polish and, sometimes, commitment.

Neither did the elaborate costumes of the Balinese group Gadung Kasturi compensate for a performance in which dance and music seemed at a standoff, much as the “battle” between the Telek, the temple guardians, and the Jauk, the evil demons, in their "Tari Topeng Telek" masked dance was. Alafia Dance Ensemble’s choreographed celebration of Haitian independence, the lively “Empowerment,” was much enhanced by excellent musicians and a guest appearance by Blanche Brown and her Group Petit Croix’s. These seductive harbingers of life and death closed EDF 30th anniversary season in one of voodoo’s more playful spirits—trickery.

Photos by RJ Muna

Top: Halau O Keikiali'i

Middle: Abadá-Capoeira San Francisco Performance Group

Bottom: CollageWest Dance Theatre

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