

International dance program stands out

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Because of the mix of cultures and modern dance, the International Choreographers' program has always been one of the most interesting at the American Dance Festival. But this year's stands out as an all-time high.

In the Reynolds Theatre

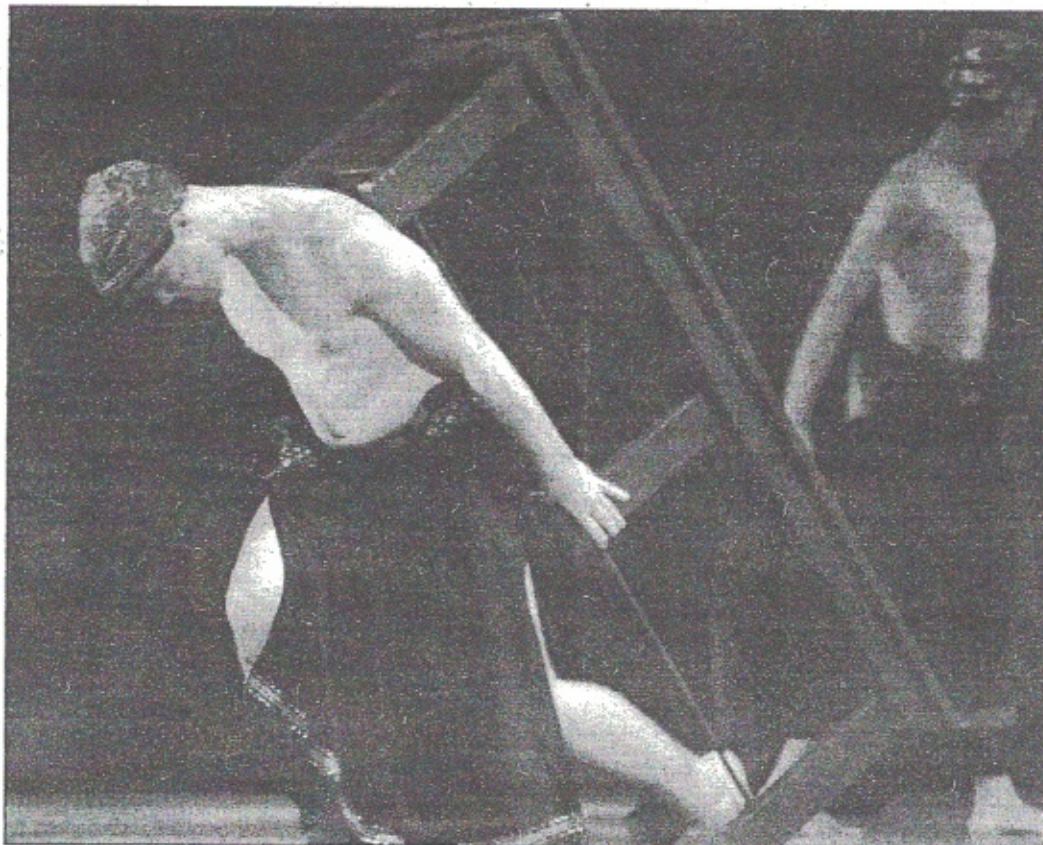
Review

program, Tuesday and Wednesday, the four choreographers displayed imagination in how they drew on various influences. When Wei of China, Boi Sakti of Indonesia, Fred Bendongue of France and Mark Haim of the United States all conveyed an urgency to communicate, and the excellent dancing of ADF students provided a fluent vehicle of expression. (Choreographers created their dances with students during the past five weeks.) Production values proved high with the technical crew outdoing themselves, especially in Haim's lavish forest set.

It took a while to get to this forest in Haim's "Self: Twice removed." Attention first centered on a person at a laptop computer to the far right of the stage and two projections of the online surfing displayed on the dropped ceiling above the stage. Then, dancers in black, black tops and pants performed sharp, frenetic and sometimes robotic movements behind and in front of a scrim in spotlights to music that sounded like snarled traffic. The fun part began when bird song replaced the music and a sole male dancer, crouched low in serpentine sways, then grasped a tethered ring in his teeth and snarled. Lights up revealed a three-dimensional forest scene with trees along the wings and a backdrop of trees framing a lake rimmed by mountains.

Enter a corps de ballet in white leotards and bathing suit-style leotards who proceeded to fill the stage with flowing balletic patterns and things never seen in ballet — like the architectural shapes built by dancers on each other's shoulders and baby dolls dropped from the ceiling. One winds up in the arms of a female dancer, swathed in cloth, like the Virgin Mary. What all this means remains unclear, but it certainly proved fun and fascinating to watch. This is the section where the tree fell and we all heard it.

Overall, as the title suggests, this dance brings to mind the distance between modern life from direct experience, such as seeing a tree fall. People settle for virtual reality on the Internet and voyeurism through such TV shows as "Survivor" and "Big Brother." Boi Sakti's "Space Urbanization" alternated urban life and village



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American Dance Festival members dance in the world premiere of "Space Urbanization" for a photo call on Tuesday. The piece was choreographed by Boi Sakti of Indonesia.

traditions in a way that suggested the importance of preserving tradition. His dance embodied the traditional Indonesian dancing of his native Sumatra. Women, beautifully costumed in long, split brown and black patterned skirts, black lace tops, the men wearing black, gold-trimmed split skirts, joined hands and moved sideways in quick, crossover steps. Women used their arms in a delicate, angular way, palms up, hands fluttering. Music consisted of traditional-sounding drums and flute, plus guttural throat chants, ear-piercing wailing, breathy exhalations and children's singing.

Backdrop projections of traffic signs, as well as disjointed movements, punctuated the urban section, while circular — and in one case, ovoid — shapes accompanied the village scenes. An egg followed by a cracked egg signaled a women's fertility dance in which their bodies shook violently with the effort of creation.

A striking image from this dance was a group of women, flowing backward, looking like a river, while four men on benches resembled sentinels on the bridge, guardians of a more natural way of life.

Bendongue's "The Last Audition: La Dernière Audition" used African-based movements, including Capoeira (Brazilian martial arts) to depict an audition

that seemed to be a metaphor for competition. It began as dancers pass metal folding chairs over their heads then take their place in the chairs, first dancing from a seated position, then in groups. At times, dancers cast wary looks at each other. Individuals tried to outdo each other in show-stopping or catwalk preening moves. But, near the end, a couple danced just for the sheer enjoyment instead of competition.

At the Tuesday post-performance talk, Bendongue, speaking through an interpreter, said his dance was inspired by the actual audition for it. More than 200 ADF students auditioned for each of the four choreographers' dances, ADF staff member Linda Tarnay said.

In "Near the Terrace," Wei especially succeeded in drawing viewers into the magical world he created. What an imagination! It's not often that this happens in a way that feels so complete. Everything seemed to contribute to the overall effect: the pale green bromeliads scattered about the stage, the frothy, pale green skirts of topless women, the strange way of moving, the sound of backbones bumping as dancers, bodies held straight, slowly slid down a flight of stairs at the end.

So much happened that, like a dream, there was a tendency to drift from one focus to another. When a figure in red "hat" and

black body tights appeared at the top of the stairs, I wanted to watch its every move, but I lost track because other movements distracted so the figure seemed to evaporate.

To say dancers' movements looked strange would be an understatement. Standing women, leaning torsos way back, looked like backward "C's" as they took mincing steps forward. Men performed very slow, controlled backward rolls as well as Capoeira moves, low to the floor, braced on the forearms, feet free-floating in a dreamy spiral.

A woman looked like one of Salvador Dali's sliding clocks as she flattened her body against the stage, then appeared to glide, one hand on the foot of a man walking beside her. Twice dancers, bodies straight, catapulted themselves in a very quick movement, like a leaping praying mantis, into the arms of kneeling male dancers. It happened so fast, it had a surreal quality — as did the entire dance. Wei notes that the work of surrealist Belgian painter Paul Delvaux inspired the dance. The figures appeared as statues come to life but still remembering the stillness from which they came. One audience member said they reminded her of mermaids. The work was so rich, so evocative, it welcomed many interpretations.