

Sunday, April 27, 2003

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With his constant trailblazing efforts, exploring ideas and going "where no one has been" (even literally going to the US way back in the 1970s because he wanted to know more, preferring to be a small fish in a big pond, an experience that has helped him to become "a fish anywhere," snatching an Isadora Duncan Award for Choreography [the equivalent of an Oscar in the world of dance] in the process) Labayan is — and will probably always be — at the center of great expectations. And yet he insists there's nothing virtuosic in his works, working so hard at his pieces in order to make them look "easy and fun" without forgetting the serious spin of getting what he considers the most important message he wishes his audience to realize: "The easiest thing to do is to complicate things when the bottom line is life is simple and beautiful."

Another striking lesson Labayan has shared, this time as a mentor, according to Katherine Sanchez, one of his students at the Philippine High School for the Arts, is "his emphasis on the connection between one's consciousness and dance; that you're a person first, then a dancer" and that, ultimately, "dancing is life."

And if there's anyone who has understood this as much as Labayan himself, it's Myra Beltran, National Commission for Culture and the Arts' *Alab ng Haraya* Awardee for her groundbreaking works as an independent artist. Her mentor proudly declares: "A lot of people are not ready to support her because of her revolutionary ideas and going against the grain but somebody has to do it. And I've got much respect for her for that, for her integrity. I'm doing *Enrico Labayan: Unbound* in order to affirm what she has done because she's my successor. I'm gonna be gone in a couple of years. She's the one to whom I've 'transferred' my intelligence, my ideas, making them her own... And since I'm somehow the more established artist here, I can say 'This woman is really good. She needs attention. Quiet please!'"

The fact that he has opted to perform at Myra Beltran's DanceForum at 38 West Avenue in Quezon City also speaks eloquently of that respect. "It's a small space, very intimate," Beltran says, "but we've spent so much time together there exploring and just having the time of our lives discovering things... It's difficult to ignore the energy this place holds." While Labayan himself unabashedly expressed at the press launch held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines last Thursday that he thinks "it would be fun to perform at the CCP main theater," it seems appropriate to see the mentor-student team make the audience "experience the works" in a place where the only magical thing happening has nothing to do with fame, but simply with thoughts, ideas that they hope will leave an indelible impression among

the artist-collaborators and the people who matter to them.

What do I expect to see in *Enrico Labayan: Unbound* in May? I asked, after a couple of hours talking about freedom and discipline and why he insists on having "house rules" and

### Who's Enrico Labayan the icon and the real Enrico Labayan?

*What you see is what you get.  
I'm in my golden years and I have no  
more lies to tell and a lot of truth to  
say. Because when you're youthful you  
have that abandon, you have time  
with you to make amends.  
At this point, no more...*

"parameters" in order to be more free and not just give in to indulgence.

I braced myself for the answer, trying to second guess how he'd rephrase "a total rip-off from expected pieces brilliantly executed by artists with a gift for expression" or maybe something like "My only obligation is to keep myself

and other people guessing..." but again, Labayan pulls out a surprise, looks at me in the eye and says, "This is something I really come home to do every 10 years because I miss my children.

They've grown and I haven't seen them for some time... Myra came from me. She was my original muse. A lot of my works were set around her (and Ronilo Jaynario) so we're just continuing our history. I see their growth every decade..." And just when I was about to lose hope I'd ever get the answer to my question, the dancer makes another spin: "So what can you expect to see during the performance? Same thing I see everyday — beauty."

Trying desperately to hide how deeply moved I was with his reply, I followed up, "But that's something so abstract. How can you make me grasp that?" The answer was vintage Labayan: "It's one of those things that you cannot describe. It's one of the things you have to witness."

I've always thought dancers were better seen, not heard, but something was telling me there is beauty in this man's heart — "I'm rich here," he says, clapping a hand on his left chest — and that when he speaks, I should listen.

"Enrico Labayan, a San Francisco-based Asian American choreographer and founder of Labayan Dance/SF, has assembled a group of committed dance artists in the Philippines who has collaborated closely with him since 1991: Myra Beltra, artistic director and founder of MyraBeltranDanceForum, Philippine Ballet Theater's premiere danseur Ronilo Jaynario and ex-PBT prima ballerina Katherine Sanchez, where her spectacular classical ballet technique, natural brilliance, intelligence and beauty made her one of the most renowned dance artists in the country. Also performing in *Enrico Labayan: Unbound* is Lea Baduria, a PBT soloist who is now also making her own mark in the Philippine dance scene.

The dance concert features Labayan's Isadora Duncan Award-winning dances for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography —

ra-  
"Excerpt  
Arias: With  
Kindness Deep..."  
a contemporary piece  
performed to the music  
of Friedrich Handel; "Quiet  
Please, There's A Lady," a  
dance that narrates strength and  
power of one's intuition, her unquestionable commitment to what "feels right" in the context of her life experience, set to the music of Gabriele Faure's "Romances"; and "Cloth," a work inspired by a passage from the Song of Songs of the Hebrew Bible — and the world premiere of Labayan's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rites of Spring).

*Enrico Labayan: Unbound* runs from May 2 to 4 at 8 p.m. at the DanceForum, 38 West Avenue, Quezon City. For inquiries, call 0918-4437988. Tickets are available at the venue from 6 p.m. to 7:55 p.m. on the day of the performance.

# DEFINING, DEFYING DANCE

