

The Postmodern Tribe

Labayen Dance meditates on technology and humanity

BY RUTH CHEN

Labayen Dance/SF, one of the Bay Area's most arresting contemporary dance companies, concluded its season at Theater Artaud last weekend with three curious premieres, including *Common Tao*, a work pushing through conventional boundaries of being human.

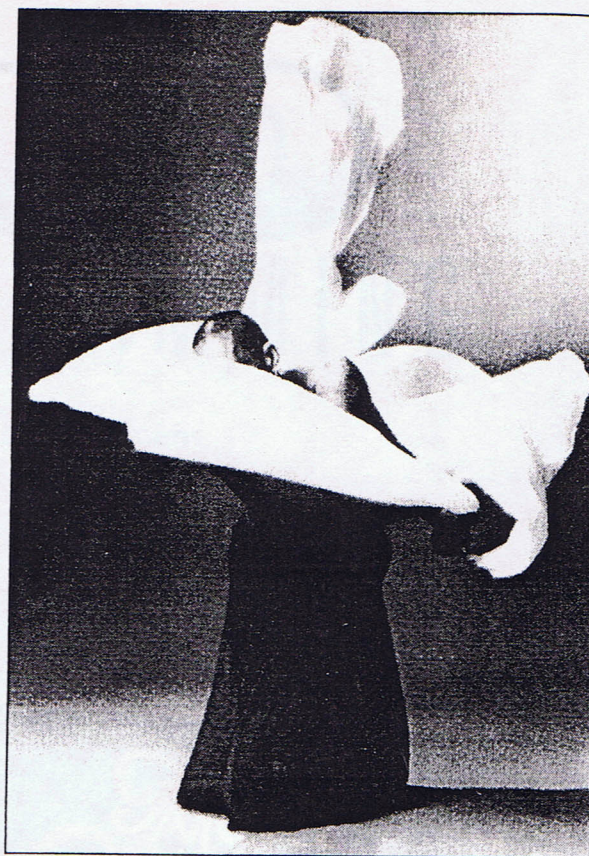
Eclectic with the pristine elegance of ballet and the daring risks of contemporary dance, the company is known for its bold, postmodern techno style—one that could have only originated from a San Francisco dance artist such as Filipino American Enrico Labayen.

Acclaimed for his innovative choreography and powerful performances, Labayen received the 1997 Isadora Duncan Award for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography for *Cloth* and *Puirt a Beul*.

Joining Labayen are two new soloists from Ballet Nacional De Peru—Never Navarro and Enrique Olachea. Other dancers include Oakland Ballet's Garreth Scott and Andre Levitt and principal dancers Anne Hendricks Greene, Kirsten Turner and Wendy Brookes. Though technically solid and graceful as individuals, the company still needs time to gel.

Deeply guttural T'boli music from the Mindanao tribe of the Philippines filled the theater for the first piece, *Unearthing: The Creation Myth*, in which Labayen nearly succeeds in returning to his ancestral roots. The work narrates a mythical story of creation and death, anchored by Pia Candelaria's masks. On the whole, *Unearthing* proved to be a mysterious and raw contemporary re-mix of folk tribal images, though the beautiful music was too loud, often overpowering the movement energy.

The opening scene was quite mesmerizing, however, with the full company in tribal attire, slowly moving toward the audience while taking their white clay masks on and off in ever-increasing momentum. Here Brookes slowly rises up and opens her arms with meditative intensity, her body unfolding like a stark mythic goddess. Two parental figures, Andre Levitt and Kristen Turner, rise slowly from the floor, moving in flat, two-dimensional planes. The menacing and powerful Cain-and-Abel interchange between the Never Navarro and Enrique Olachea included split-turning leaps, fast jumps with triple spins, and traditional warlike gestures demonstrating their prowess. The group reappears in prancing



Enrico Labayen

tribal steps, pounding the floor like the human heart.

Song of the Water, a fragmented, abstract and incoherent piece, addresses environmental destruction and the dangers it presents to indigenous tribes. Against the backdrop of four towering paintings of tribal, Picasso-like faces by Melissa Gates as well as the pop techno sound of vocalist Grace Nono, the company begins on their backs, lying in a circle, with one knee propped up. From there, *Song of the Water* randomly juxtaposes a techno mesh of pop rock moves with modern ballet.

In "Salidumay," the first section, dancers rise, burst and leap across the stage in a series of light-hearted modern ballet phrases, some in black modern attire and others in white iridescent bird-like tutus, featuring the full company in well-executed modern ballet.

The second section, "Hot Air Balloon," features Bell, Levitt and Brookes, who smack their loud and sexy arms and jerking hips. Turner plays a brash, voluptuous female with her hesitant dancing. Contrasting this is the refined *pas de deux* between Scott and Greene, whose precise turns match her delightfully pristine leaps and pointework.

The last section, "Ay, Nukdeyar," features Navarro exploding with a grounded punch in an otherwise fragmented stream-of-conscious-

ness piece.

Labayen's strongest and most coherent piece of the evening, *Common Tao*, is a dance celebration communicating an elemental and thought-provoking image of contemporary humanity. Pushing past the structure of relationships that so often define our differences, Labayen reaches instead for the essential sense of being, unveiling the technological links that tie people together. With bodies in constant motion, re-shuffled across space and time, the company portrays a timeless perspective in which cultures melt into one essential society. The dancers reach and grab repetitively, their bodies like a postmodern green army of civilians whose latent streak of dark instincts and emotions are overlaid by a technological veneer.

The angular yet flamenco-like arms and stances of the women suggest cultural residues. The fascinating costumes by Domini Lemire Elmore place the dancers in gray-green attire, some in swim caps and goggles, looking like aviation pilots and suggesting technological transformation.

The powerfully precise dancing by Atwell, Guadalupe, Miller and Olachea proves remarkable within this foreboding mechanistic mood of rapid human interaction, and the company repeats curiously angular phrases, speeding to a sudden climax against the pounding music of David Lang and Lisa Goshfield.