



IT'S A SIGN Program: 'It's a Sign,' 'Lullaby Goodbye,' 'Day and Dreams,' 'Chicks,' and 'Calabash'

Review by Toba Singer

November 7, 2003 -- ODC Theater, San Francisco

O the metaphors you could have invoked in days of yore to describe this company! "Dark Horse!" "Best-kept Secret!" Or how about the gerund-driven, "Coming from behind"?

But that was then. This is now. The bright, shining steed is out of the gate, the secret is no longer, and the company has arrived triumphant at the finish line. As for the "California" in the company's name, it could be that "California" is too small geographically to capture the big-hearted, global creativity the choreographers and these dancers deliver. The company could consider changing its name to reflect and celebrate how universal its work has become. After all, a chain of trendy pizza restaurants it is not...

"It's a sign," is up first. A slate-hue'd sculpture of interpolated tetrahedrons has a sitar player nesting in one of its cubes. Backlighting brightens the theater's rear brick wall so that it reflects a segment of the sculpture. Sheetal Naren Gandhi sits on a perch upstage center, plucking the red petals of a flower. Voiceover has her giving a variety of readings of "He loves me. He loves me not." This is clearly not going to be the "Giselle" reading, or even given the Bombay connection, anything remotely resembling "Giselle"'s fiery twin, "La Bayadère."

Two women are paired in a series of embraces downstage. They move down a level to the floor, and their work spreads and bubbles up like ghee sizzling in a skillet. A spiked transistor radio suddenly appears suspended in mid air. Gandhi casts a loaded glance its way and her voiceover voice declares, "If 'Unchained Melody,' comes on right now, it means he loves me!" Aha! Now we're open for business—the business of attaching projected real or imagined significance to random events. Superstition is a favored pre-adolescent pastime. It is frankly frightening that many otherwise adult artists who ought to know better have retrogressed into embracing obscurantism under the rubric of the anti-scientific tyranny known as the New Age. This piece jauntily places the crystal ball gazers in proper perspective.

Sequenced cannons of dancers troll the stage, or execute interesting barrel rolls on the floor, embracing or displaying "signs" of one kind or another, including literal signs velcro'd to their backs, with Indian chants and rain stick-like cadences conferring plenty of karma to bolster the comic premise. Up and down go the dancers like well-timed pistons. Next there are incense pots swinging from the raised hands of a duo, as musky air further encumbers the sensory payload. The composition is pleasing and refreshing, with California Contemporary Dancers' characteristic drive-by, no-shtick comedy moving seamlessly into hypnotic torso rotations punctuated by claps. If anything, this feast could do with a little *less*: a little less voiceover (but keep some), and a little less bulk on one or two of the dancers (but not anorectic, please). Arms miming driving steer us into a new incarnation: traffic signs! And the piece turns down the karmic off ramp to home via home stretch/back stretch pulses on the floor. This work is hella funny!

"Lullaby Goodbye" is dedicated to the memory of choreographer Sheetal Naren Gandhi's father: In the

program notes, she says “I miss my dad like a wave passing through me,” and indeed, this Graham-derivative piece gives us lulling torsos swathed in white costumes, and vine-covered tree branches, with wind tunnel music and wind-chimes making that grief frisson through the audience. The white-costumed women cleanse in undulations of ablutions, and then mark their rituals’ end by quietly grasping hands in front of bodies. With faces turned on the diagonal, backs contract and release in sorrow, for on the grid of life, both birth and its opposite arrive on a hyperbolic wave. We wonder how this would look in another space, on a raised stage for example? Would it lose its theatricality or gain perspective? If the work momentarily goes sophomoric, it recovers full integrity in its brilliant finish, when the dancers form a human crèche, and find closure in repose.

“Chicks” is a signature piece that lampoons the feminist outcry of the Second Wave, “Women *are not* chicks!” Here, women *are* chicks, and moreover, every chick is one of a coté of female characters you’ve had to have met, or at least covertly observed working the habitat. There’s the poseur (poseuse?) chick off on a model’s runway walk, crossing foot over ankle as she raises only one eyebrow and fixes her stiletto gaze on the audience, Row C. There’s the fluttery chick. She is everywhere at once, all over center stage, no matter who else may require it.

There’s yer clucker and yer strutter, each costumed accordingly, in matching hues of egg-yolks-beaten-to-lemon-yellow, and adorned with—feathers. They scratch and scabble to the music of Nina Simone and Zap Mama, twaddling onto hay bales, heads bobbing, and legs poking out into stylized arabesques and then off into funky chicken syncopated rhythms. One costume query: Why are the chicks wearing those girdle-y briefs under their costumes? They are distracting and unattractive. While critics in glass houses ought not to throw stones, perhaps this critic would refrain from so throwing were the dancers to drop a few stone in the interests of changing out those Just-My-Size undies for camisole leotards!

No barnyard is complete without its only rooster (Yes, I know; I remember: “A Chick Needs a Rooster Like a Fish needs a Jetski”) and yet, without Will Elder-Groebe’s red-crested rooster wearing a ‘70s retro disco lounge shirt, we would not have the riotously funny henhouse pandemonium that his entrance incites.

Jamie Duggan and Will Elder-Groebe pair up in a memorable pas de deux called “Day and Dreams.” She is arresting, in red harem pants and a bolero/halter top, and he is her cool glass of Lassi, all in white. He encircles her as rain-stick music comes up and they mirror each other’s steps, hands clasped. Duggan’s technique, concentration and artistry remind us of her ingénue ballet training years at San Francisco Ballet School, the fruits of which she now generously and consummately shares with her audience. She slides down Elder-Groebe’s flank, fully tethered to their partnership, but when she cuts herself loose, she’s her own woman in her own body. She never abandons the shared chemistry of the duet, even as she breaks out into steps that mark the steady cadence of drum pops.

The grasped hands and mirroring at the top of the piece could have taken this work in a gaudy direction, but the concentration revealed in the dancers’ mutually unflinching gaze and body melding carries the piece from those hands and mirrorings, through Duggan’s solo work, into a chain of veronica turns that polishes all of it up to a high gloss.

The evening’s closer, “Calabash” is a diligent, inventive, yet ritual exploration of women’s rondeur in music and dance. The program notes explain, “A calabash is a dried gourd, usually used to carry water. Traditionally, women are not allowed to drum in most African cultures, yet in the northern part of Ghana, after the market day is done, the women of the Daghami tribe would take their calabashes, flip them upside down, and when no man was around, they would play and sing songs about their lives.”

Three dancers, Celine Alwyn, Kamala Devam and Sheetal Naren Gandhi, are seated on the floor so as to describe a great, equilateral triangle, each dancer holding a pumpkin drum. Gandhi initiates a chant, “Damí, damí,” and all three dancers accompany her with closed fists and then open-handed gentle slaps, heads marking the hand rhythms. If this were all there was, it would be enough, but then the rhythms change and there’s a cleansing, satisfying quality to the next set. The women stretch their legs into wide second position on the floor, and as they do, the multiplying rhythms are picked up by conga and snare drums, played by John Waller and M.C. Rai. There is the flash of the working hands and arms, the inclination of the heads, and the imagined spirits that the primitive rhythms invoke, which seem to mimic the floor work like phantom dance partners.

The drums are nodal points for ingenious combinations featuring the purest sort of mime, absent “clever” conceits or tricks. Finally, the women exchange their drums which, overturned, are now vessels. They pass them, each to each, as reverentially as one would a newborn child to waiting arms. The evening’s program ends on a note of contentment.

Please see and support this company! For it is written that you will take a remnant of their contentment home with you. No extra charge.