

Young Ko-Thi group simply dynamic

Disciplined dancers show
a sense of freedom

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When we think of African dance and music, the explosive

dances and
brainy, layered
polyrhythms of
West Africa

REVIEW

come to mind. Thursday at the Pabst Theater, Ko-Thi Dance Company artistic director Ferne Caulker left West Africa to her youth company, Ton Ko-Thi.

The 50 or so drumming and dancing kids, perhaps 6 to 16, burst limbs out from the center of the body with great power and speed. A promising corps of boys includes several who can do all manner of aerial gymnastic tricks and strength moves — in rhythm and with panache.

Ton Ko-Thi's choreographer, Melissa Blanks, and orchestrator, Romero Beverly, dumb down nothing for their charges. Intricate ensemble work runs like the Swiss rail system, yet does not lead to mechanical lockstep. These young dancers and drummers are so disciplined that they have broken through, into a zone of freedom and joy.

The grown-ups focused on Afro-Caribbean music and dance, which have a very different dynamic. Congas, timbales, *batas* and cowbells don't sound like West African *djembes*, *jun-juns* and *shakeres*. West African drumming is layered rhythmic counterpoint, while the Caribbean styles heard Thursday



TOM LYNN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Ko-Thi Dance Company rehearses for its performance Thursday at the Pabst Theater. The program features the youth company doing West African dance, while the older group focuses on Afro-Caribbean.

are more like heterophony, with everyone on the same rhythm.

It's not easy to do, especially with the toe-stubbing unison breaks that music director McKinley Perkins interjects, but it's not as soloistic and showy as West African drumming. This is essentially trance music. West African music wrings you out with enormous tension and mighty, cathartic climaxes. You settle into the Afro-Caribbean and ride along.

Caulker offered a reworked, re-costumed "Binhma," from 1982. Its masked figures, so important in African culture, are abstracted in three gauzy, tent-like costumes that conceal the dancers within. Sinuous modern dancers — the excellent Louis Hurd, LaToya McCollum and Ja-

mie Patton, in unitards — weave about them. Melissa Blanks, in a ruffled orange slit skirt, revealing top and straw Stetson, vamps alluringly with a cigar in a central solo reminiscent of Katharine Dunham in a naughty mood.

Roxanne Kess offered two strong new works on Afro-Cuban themes, with mesmerizing orchestrations by Perkins. Languid, repetitive singing by a septet of women and one man goes on for a long time before the 10 dancers enter in "Oggun Y Ochun." It lulls, and so does the formal dancing of Oggun, a warrior god, and Ochun, goddess of love and beauty. Five women in white-and-gold gowns represent her; five men in green-and-purple trousers and sashes repre-

sent him. Kess builds character through traditional trance-inducing steps, including a bizarre straight-leg stagger new to me. She then builds story and relationship through clever variations on that movement.

The dancers are wonderfully clear and athletic here and in Kess' "Rumambo/Marumba." Mambo and rumba get all mixed up as five men flirt boisterously with 10 women. Kess captures the giddy essence of both dances in the constant overbalancing forward and overcompensating backward that give the whole enterprise off-balance humor and goofy charm.

Ko-Thi will repeat this program at 7:30 tonight and Saturday.