

# Dancers show African roots of their art

## Thrilling evening with Ton Ko-Thi captivates sold-out Pabst Theater

By **TOM STRINI**

Journal Sentinel dance critic

Thursday evening, the girls of Ton Ko-Thi, the sensational youth ensemble of the Ko-Thi Dance Company, stormed the stage not in the expected traditional African garb, but in the modern school uniforms of the townships of South Africa.

They went along with the Ton Ko-Thi Orchestra's taut, West African polyrhythms and danced the expected African steps — mostly. Every so often, they broke out into Soul Train shimmies and hip-hop. Choreographer Melissa Beverly encouraged her young dancers to bring their own street moves into the mix. The two idioms coexisted neatly, and the modern steps fit the traditional rhythms without so much as one awkward beat.

That summarized the the-

sis of the whole thrilling evening: African-American vernacular dance is rooted in Africa, and those roots are not very far beneath the surface.

Olive Dance Theatre, a hip-hop group from Philadelphia, and Step-By-Step, a rhythmic drill squad from Providence, R.I., are Ko-Thi's guests on this program.

Step-By-Step is a community center youth group, not a professional com-

**REVIEW**pany. The eight teenage performers are impressively disciplined in their stomping, body percussion and chanting rhythms and in their formations. They lack presence and projection and don't know how to structure a program, but never mind that. They were on stage as representatives of the African-American grass-roots, and their raw charm completely won over the crowd.

Their presence also reinforced the thrust of the overall program. Ko-Thi's dancers followed Step-By-

Step with an intensely concentrated take on South African gumboot dancing. The close ensemble and body percussion of the gumboot style made it look like a direct transcontinental link to African-American stepping.

Only the chiming of the ankle bells of the 10 Ko-Thi women and the sizzle of cowrie shells strapped to the ankles of the four Ko-Thi men accompanied this focused, symmetrically arranged dance. The dance was the music, the music was the dance, and the fusing of the two made this highly concentrated dance even more intense. Artistic director Ferne Caulker choreographed the men, and Roxanne Fair choreographed the women. The groups got together only in the final moments.

Olive's four men take break dancing to a new level. Gone is the usual macho posturing. It was replaced by buoyant athleticism and acute rhythmic wit in the fabulous jam with Ko-Thi's drummers at the end of the

concert. In Olive's own set, dancers Raphael Xavier, Jaamal Benjamin, Cesa Zuniga and Bret Syfert gave a vivid account of a slave-ship nightmare in an extended adagio that was mostly unmetered. Who knew hip-hop could exist without a pounding beat, or that it could be lyrical and expressive?

The men of the Heritage Chorale gave a moving account of Ladysmith Black Mambazo's "Homeless" to open the program. Romero Beverly, Ko-Thi's new music director, offered "African Sun," an endlessly fascinating unfolding of transparent, layered rhythm for the Ko-Thi Orchestra. The orchestra revived Dumah Saafir's "Toussaint," and what a pleasure it was to feel that deep groove that was Ko-Thi's trademark during his tenure, years ago, as music director.

---

*Thursday's program sold out the Pabst Theater. Some seats remain for repeat performances at 7:30 p.m. tonight and Saturday. E-mail Tom Strini at [tstrini@journalsentinel.com](mailto:tstrini@journalsentinel.com).*