

Ko-Thi comes alive in 'Sundiata'

Fresh approach paves way
for vibrant, pure dancing
in heroic tale of Mali king

By **TOM STRINI**

Journal Sentinel dance critic

Thursday night, Ko-Thi Dance Company unveiled a "Song of Sundiata" that has almost nothing to do with the 1992 and '96 shows of that title. The past versions were talky and earnest in their treatment of the legend surrounding West Africa's empire-building medieval king of Mali.

Aside from a searing, poetical introduction by Muhibb Dyer, who invoked the heroic spirit of Sundiata as a source of African-American staying power in the face of the cruelest adversity, the new version is short on narrative and long on virtuosity and exuberance.

Sundiata (Deitrei Henly) duly and magically overcomes his inability to walk and starts his myth and empire rolling. Then he simply sits and watches as his people celebrate the event with ever more dazzling dances, songs and drumming (McKinley Perkins' drum corps was awesome in its power, and deft in its rhythmic sophistication, as always). The story is merely an excuse for a string of production numbers.

But what numbers they are. This was the best pure dancing I've seen from Ko-Thi in nearly 20 years of watching, and it was the most startlingly different style of dancing I've seen from the company.

The influence of Rose-Marie Guiraud, a guest choreographer from Ivory Coast, surely had something to do with that. While she was in Milwaukee, Guiraud spoke of the subtlety of Ivorian dancing, as compared with the bounding flash of the more familiar Senegalese style. We saw what she meant in the prophecy

scene, in a quartet for veiled women. Small, complicated footwork, derrieres swaying in asymmetric rhythms and slow, expressive curlings of arms within semi-concealing shawls made for a mysterious and fascinating piece. An almost Balinese gamelan musical texture of bells and marimbas accompanied. Ko-Thi has never done such a dance, and I've never seen the likes of it anywhere else.

The presence of four charismatic, skilled, athletic male dancers is changing the look of the company, too. Enoch Boyd, D'Angelo Boston, Brandon Bradley and Louis Hurd are excellent ensemble dancers and spectacular soloists. Boyd and Bradley can do all sorts of aerial gymnastic tricks, all of them worked neatly into flow of the choreography. On top of that, they contributed a good-natured, loosey-goosey atmosphere of fun.

In the many celebration dances, for example, they watched what the women did and commented by echoing and varying the step in the background. Sometimes they even jumped in and joined in flirtatious duets that came very close to theatricalized social dancing. The male-female dance relationships are something new and welcome, after all those years when the men drummed and the women danced and the two rarely came into contact. They were fun together, and funny. They were also stupendously fast and marvelously varied in their solo invention.

Some might argue that modern vernacular, African-American as well as African, is creeping into the style at the cost of authenticity. But dance is ephemeral, and change is in its nature. The Ko-Thi dancers, including the fabulous Ton Ko-Thi youth company, danced Thursday night as if they had been set free.

"Song of Sundiata" played to a house of about 550 at the Pabst Theater. It will be repeated at 8 tonight and 7 p.m. Saturday.