

LA TROUPE MAKANDAL

Rising Sun

This is the fourth year La Troupe Makandal is doing its three part winter cycle, *Rising Sun: A Vodou Drama of Death and Rebirth*. Although the parts of the cycle, *Day of the Dead* in November, *Night of Fire* in December, and *Carnival Dawn* in January remain the same, each year's performances are different, with different approaches to saluting the Vodou lwas and the progression to and away from the winter solstice. In the intimate wood-paneled room at South Oxford Place, the Brooklyn-based Haitian company's powerful drumming and chant and engaging dances take one in, making one feel like a participant beyond those sections that specifically invite in the audience.

The *Day of the Dead* I saw this year on Saturday, November 15, 2003 was not the *Day of the Dead* I saw in 2001 when the performance was at times more like a ceremony with less structured dance and some very realistic instances of possession. This year the Gede family of spirits, "spiritual forces that govern the underworld," were saluted in a variety of ways that tied them to other spirits and to Haitian history, climaxing in an extended drama at the cemetery, in which, in the Haitian way, death makes its claim not just with sorrow, but with humor, high spirits, and the erotic presaging of new life.

Opening with a salute to Ountò, the spirit of drumming and drummers, was a fine way to start for a company whose artistic

director, Frisner Augustin, is a master drummer. With Augustin on first drum, beating with both hand and stick, Steve Deats on the smaller second, Guy de Chalus on the little third drum (both equipped with two sticks), and Marc Etienne and Kesler Pierre on congas and cowbell, we heard drumming throughout that was intricately meshed with power and precision. Rosena, a singer, and two other backup singer-dancers, danced in place, as if propelled by the music.

Christine Etienne read, in English, the brief poem *Testament*, originally written in Kreyol by Felix Morisseau-Leroy (1913-98), which gives instructions on how to celebrate his death. For *Ankò Mwen Malere*, a medley of songs for the spirits of the earth and its cultivation (its lwa, Cousin Zaka, notes say, "many consider Gede's amiable but gauche country brother"), the same informal format with room for improvisation was used as for *Ountò*, with the singers moving out more to dance with each other and singer-dancer Smith Destin taking over at times to sing in a high falsetto.

Although *Day of the Dead* was tight and well-plotted, there were surprises. The Gede, after all, are "tricksters [who] sit at the nexus of death and rebirth." Lois Wilcken, an ethnomusicologist who is executive director of Makandal and who comes out to give oral notes, emerged in a black hat, channeling anthropologist Harold Courlander. "I heard there was a party for the dead tonight," he said. "That's why

I came." As Wilcken read the legend of *Papa Gede Bèl Gason* from Courlander's *The Drum and the Hoe*, describing the descent of Gede on the presidential palace to extort money, four women in black suits, hats, shades, and striped canes emerged to peer over her shoulder and extract money. These Gede formed a tightening square to dance with revolving pelvises in wide second positions, resting on their sticks at times, circling, and whirling away. Augustin sang and the drumming and chant certainly seemed strong enough to raise the dead.

A new rhythm, Ibo, began and the four returned in red skirts and red fringed and peplumed tops to dance for "the Ibo spirits, soul escorts who lead the dead back to their ancestral home." I had never thought of this dance, with its hobbling steps giving way to kicks, and pulsing chests and pulsing hips with feet pushing back and flung up alternating arms, that way. The choreography for the four was mostly in unison before Smith Destin, a masterful dancer with a richly inflected body who has been with the troupe since its early days, did a quick powerful solo full of kicks, chasing feet, and pulsing arms.

After a brief introduction to a song about Grenadiers attacking the French during the Haitian Revolution as a salute to the upcoming 200th anniversary of Haitian independence in 2004, came another surprise. Destin and Rosena began to dance the



DAY OF THE DEAD

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Kongo Paillette, a flirtatious dance with shaking shoulders and sliding steps to the side as the hips also slide out, and then they moved into the audience to recruit new dancers. It's a dance that's great fun to do.

The drummers, some of whom had sported shades in the first half, emerged back on their small stage after intermission with powdered faces. Four of the five female dancers for *Gede the Spider* had on black unitards with white, yellow, gold, and red streaks. Doing choreography by Mikerline Pierre reflecting the dance of Zarenyen the Spider, a Gede from the Petwo nation (most other Gede are from the Rada nation), the five assumed wide stances and scooped arms and fluttered hands in a spidery way as they circled. Some got down on their hands and knees. Contracting bodies and fluttering hands, four circled the fifth dancer, the only one in a gray unitard, until they sidled out, leaving her to solo. She stalked, pivoted until she fell to the floor, and, reaching out, walked on her knees. As in Ibo, the choreography was basic, but with the dancers on the floor right in front of us worked well.

To a Petwo rhythm, Destin, in red pants, headband, armband, and bare chest danced a foot chasing step like that of the Cuban Yoruba Shango, joined by a very talented and very small girl in a red and gold print skirt and headwrap. As the feet chased each other, the arms pulled out, palms forward. The little girl, Barbara Philippe, soloed

in the center and then Destin lifted her up to the four cardinal points.

Etienne read an English translation of *Guinea*, a poem by Jacques Roumain (1907-44) that speaks of death guiding you on a slow road to Guinea (or Africa), where "your forefathers are waiting for you by the side of the road," before *Finale: The Cemetery*, which turned into a choreographed theater of many surprises. Sandy St. Cyr as Maman Brijit (Mama Bridget) rolled her hips and derriere, stuffed beneath her brown skirt, as she went to the whitened cross in one corner of the room and began to hand the black and white candles that had been there all evening to another dancer to take out. Dancing with the final candle, Brijit met Smith Destin as Bawon Samdi (Baron Samedi), her fellow guard of the cemetery, in his usual finery: top hat, tailcoat, shades, face whitened to suggest his corpse-like nature. Maman Brijit embraced the Bawon tenderly.

He took the remaining candle and presented it to the four directions. His body shuddering, the Bawon fell to floor, writhing from side to side. Destin, with his minute body inflections, is a master at such shuddering and writhing. Brijit moaned over her fallen comrade and stuffed his facial orifices with cotton as in Vodou funeral rites and wrapped his face, burying her own in her hands. Four women Gede shifted hips as they placed candles around the corpse. The drums and chant were hot as these Gede danced over the corpse,

feet between the candles. The four, Mikerline Pierre, the choreographer and best dancer, Natalie Pardo, Marilyn Louis, and Gabriella Cole, danced in a square around the corpse, knees moving in and out, hips circling and shifting, dancing the moves of Banda. They pushed their sticks under their legs and shimmied up. Brijit tried to rouse the Bawon, shaking her extended butt over him, but did not succeed. The women hoisted him up, staggering back and forth with him.

Augustin got us to clap, sharing in the drama as the dancers carried the Bawon out. A woman, I think Pierre, danced Banda, revolving her hips with her back to us, shimmying, staggering around with an upward thrust of the chest, going on stage to dance in front of the drummers. When the Bawon returned, with knees in and out Banda style, he smiled at her as if he'd tricked her, and with tiny steps sidled forward. She danced to him and jumped on his hip. Holding her, she bent back and fluttered her legs. Brijit returned without her padding and the other Gede entered, too, revolving hips and pulsing pelvises. As the Bawon, Destin was really scary.

All six dancers lined up, moving backwards and forwards, knees in and out. Destin danced with the little girl, who made beautiful chest contractions. While the wonderful music continued, Wilcken introduced all the performers. They had given us a really good show in which planning still left space for spontaneity. ♪

