

## Stage: Voodoo Rituals

**N**OMINALLY, this is an enlightened age, but to many people the word "voodoo" still conjures lurid Hollywood visions of pounding drums and things that go bump in the night. More properly, voodoo is a colloquial modification of vodun, the name given by the Fon people of Dahomey to an African religion that has put down deep roots in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean since the years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

It's a religion practiced by millions of people, in the Caribbean and in New York City and other urban centers, and its traditions include percussive and vocal music, dance, and ritual-oriented visual arts such as the drawing of *vevés*, the complex cosmological diagrams that are sketched in chalk on the floors of temples. Several important West African cultures have contributed to the New World voodoo tradition, but it has long since developed cultural patterns that are distinctly its own.

La Troupe Makandal, which has been giving periodic performances at Soundscape, 500 West 52d Street, and was there last Friday night, presents staged but highly authentic voodoo rituals. As in many African-derived religious and musical traditions, the Haitian master drummer is a repository of rhythms and ritual songs, and La Troupe Makandal is directed by a spectacular drummer, Frisner Augustin. He has organized an impressive group of percussionists, singers and dancers whose evident devotion to the tradition is matched by their energy and powerfully integrated rhythmic attack.

The rhythms of voodoo or trance rhythms are intended to help trigger and direct spirit possession, and while such possessions are not common outside the ritual context, even in a concert situation the drumming retains a strong surging undertow. As in much trance drumming the world over, the basic rhythm pattern in triple meter is overlaid by chattering cross-rhythms at exact multiples of the fundamental tempo.

At Soundscape, Frisner Augustin embroidered explosive improvisations on his large double-headed drum over the ensemble's deftly layered

rhythmic conversations while always keeping an eye on dancers and singers and guiding the ebb and flow of relaxation and intensity. The ensemble's singing, with harmonizing in the luminous parallel thirds of the West African coast, was richly textured, the dancing supple and electric. La Troupe Makandal provides a provocative, mesmerizing evening one does not soon forget.

Robert Palmer