

# Fast Learner

*Dancer Keith Sabado Is Fueled by the Tension Between Being a Public Performer and a Private Person*

Keith Sabado (l) in *Striptease*.

by Robert Sandla

**A**rrogantly sleazy, brazenly coy, Keith Sabado strides center stage in Mark Morris's *Striptease* in luridly dyed velvet pajamas, thrusts his gyrating pelvis forward, and slowly, teasingly unfurls an oversized Oriental fan at crotch level. Artfully dodging eye contact, he massages the fan with an exaggerated narcissistic heat which ridicules conventional sexual passion: This man is his own greatest fan. And since Sabado is a Filipino-American, Morris's cagey staging is a male inversion of such classics of racist kitsch as "Fan Tan Fannie" from *Flower Drum Song*. It's Chippendale Chinoiserie, no matter the imprecision of race.

Off stage, Sabado is not at all what one might expect. In conversation, he is thoughtful, warm, willing to wait for the most precise formulation of an idea, and yet always ready to explode in laughter. Like the full-length *Mythologies*, based on the essays of Roland Barthes, of which *Striptease* is but the most provocative section, Sabado is keenly aware of multiple viewpoints. He sees several sides of every issue; it's a prismatic intelligence.

In fact, of the many roles Sabado has performed in Morris's wildly eclectic repertory since joining the company in 1984, the dancer states that perhaps he most closely identifies with the polar opposite of the aggressive eclysiast of *Striptease*.

"I don't know if I am drawn to the role because it's one of the first things I did when I joined the company, but I love the solo Mark gave me in *Gloria*, to Vivaldi's *Gloria*. I think the part was originally choreographed on Doug Varone, but it's always felt completely natural to me. It's a very lonely, very solitary and seeking figure, and that's always been a serious

side of me. I wonder if Mark sensed that." Sabado is in town with the Mark Morris Dance Group to prepare for a season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, May 17-22. He's glad to be staying in just one place for a while, having completed the sort of nightmarish cross-country touring that left him with a cautious new attitude.

"At first touring was fun—and, let's face it, Europe is a lot more interesting to tour than Nebraska. But eventually I just let the company manager tell me when and where to meet at the airport, and where we're going when we got there."

In September, the company will establish a more permanent home in Brussels, where it will replace Maurice Bejart's flamboyant Ballet of the 20th Century as the dance company in residence at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie. As part of a state-supported opera house, the company will have eight rehearsal studios, three theaters, a \$1.5 million budget, and the kind of career security unknown to American dancers outside the few major companies able to guarantee year-round employment.

Despite his current success, Sabado's route to dance was characteristically circuitous. A native of Seattle, Washington, he only started dancing seriously at the University of Washington.

"I had had a very slight introduction to dance, doing some musical theater in high school. It took me a long time to decide what to do, but when I finally got to the University of Washington, I worked very hard as a pre-med student for a year and a half. I realized that I was more in love with the idea of being a doctor—helping mankind and all that—than I was with the process of becoming one, so I switched to English and drama. Drama majors had to take some modern dance, and so I ended up grunting and

struggling through a Graham class. Starting to dance as an adult is not easy. I had always been uncoordinated, not athletic, always the last chosen for a team. But I transferred to the advanced class after one quarter. The program was run at the time by Ruthanna Boris, and she placed me in the advanced ballet class right away, too. It was pretty laughable, but I learned fast.

"What pushed me toward the non-verbal communication of dance was that I had trouble making the words of a script my own. In dance, I always felt more comfortable, more in control of what I was doing, what I was 'saying.' Also, the dance world is a more comfortable situation for someone who is gay."

Increasingly involved with dance, Sabado made the inevitable move to New York, where he studied with teachers such as May O'Donnell and Pearl Lang, and earned a scholarship at the Alvin Ailey School. Typically for a freelance concert dancer, he performed with a number of companies, among them those of Pauline Koner, Hannah Kahn, Jim Self, and Rosalind Newman.

**S**urprisingly, although they had mutual friends, Sabado and fellow Seattle native Morris did not know each other. They met when Morris rejoined the Newman company for a concert at the Dance Center at New York's 14th Street Y. What drew Sabado to Morris?

"Mark himself. He's a very fascinating individual. Also, I had seen his *New Love Song Waltzes* [to Johannes Brahms's *Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 65] and thought it was one of the most wonderful things I had ever seen. We talked for a long time about working together, but didn't connect until the 1984 BAM season, when I performed the Vivaldi *Gloria*."

Since then, Sabado has amassed sub-

stantial experience performing in Morris's dances, among them *New Love Song Waltzes*, which will be seen this season at BAM. Still, Sabado is not always entirely comfortable on stage.

"Nervousness can be a problem for me, but it falls away as the performance focuses, as concentration gets real deep and hot. The longer you perform, the more you do it, the simpler things get. The more understanding you have, the more you are able to play with the give and take of each performance and follow sudden impulses. Over time, the communication has become simpler.

"But that isn't to say that doing *Striptease* was easy, although it wasn't so difficult in Boston as it was in New York. In Boston, we had the freedom of anonymity. Here we all knew a lot of people. It forced me to think about sexuality, about 'pornography,' and about Barthes's meaning in his essays. Aside from the personal level, though, what makes the piece fascinating is the idea that it is the moment right before you take everything off that is the most sexually stimulating. After that, it's almost anticlimactic. So the idea I used in *Striptease* is that I am slightly antagonistic about the idea of taking my clothes off, that I know it is titillating for the audience but I was just ambivalent enough about the process to make it interesting.

"Even after all this time with such a good group, the idea of performing on stage is frightening, scary, funny, and irresistible—all at once. I won't deny that I love it. I have a strong dichotomy between being a very private person and being a very public person by virtue of the fact that I am a performer. You can't very well ask people to watch you perform if you're not interested in being public. That struggle, that dichotomy is an essential part of me. It's the dilemma that fuels me."

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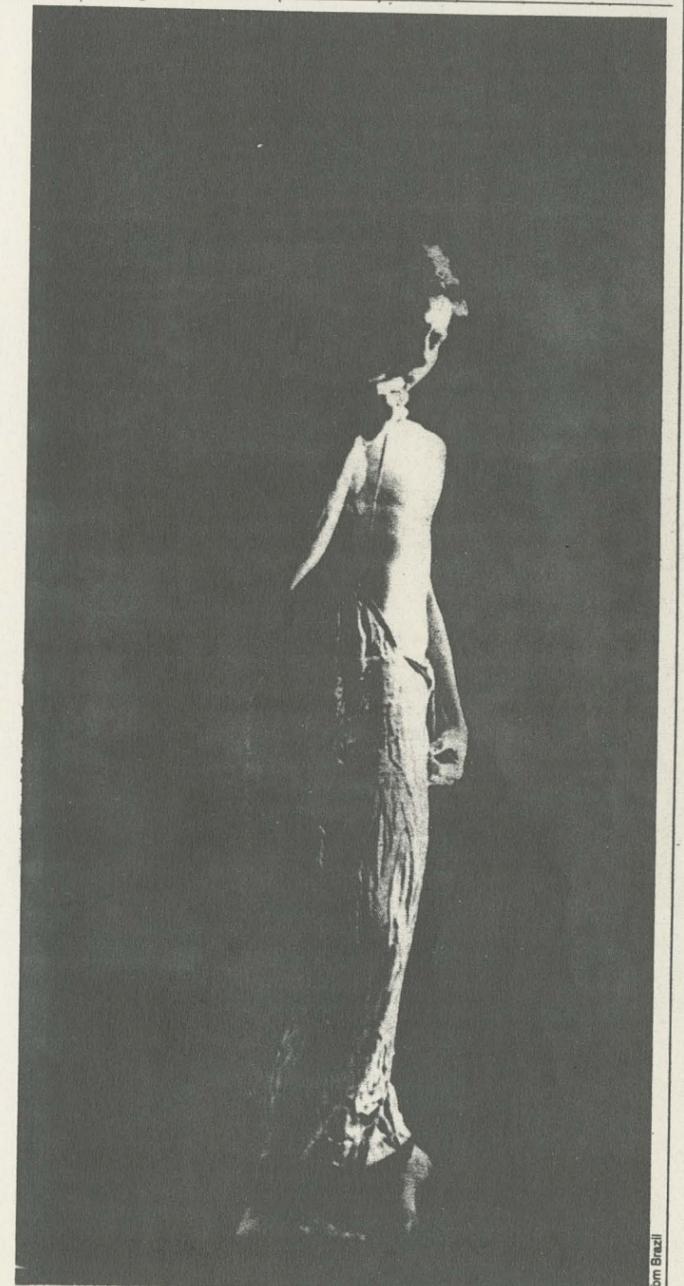
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