

SECTION 3 / ENTERTAINMENT

Using some theatrics to put on a new face

DANCE

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THIS year in Boston we've seen companies push dance in radical new directions. Sometimes it's hard to tell whether the new choreographers are out to revolutionize the art form or overthrow it altogether.

It's easier to recall the huge brass rings and plastic booths from Sankai Juku's "Jomon Sho" at the Opera House last fall than it is to remember how the Butoh dance company moved among them. In one's memory, the dancers' haunting white-powdered figures are still seen in their primeval-looking poses, rather than moving about the stage.

And where Sankai Juku slowed it down, Canada's La La La Human Steps cranked it up. Their movement is fast and furious, and they offer plenty of distractions. The set for their piece on Bette Midler's recent TV special, for instance, was an empty swimming pool, and videos were interspersed with the dancing.

Different as these two groups are, both present surroundings that are at least as important as the dance. Granted, there's nothing new — or wrong — about going for the big production. What would "Swan Lake" be without Tchaikovsky, that mournful pond and several hundred yards of tulle? But if the sound, lights and wardrobe truck broke down on tour, I'd rather see "Swan Lake" in warmup clothes than

"Jomon Sho" on a bare stage or La La La out of the pool with the projector turned off.

Where "Swan Lake" uses theatrics to support an evening of dance, Yushio Amegatsu and Edouard Lock (choreographers, respectively, of Sankai Juku and La La La Human Steps) design the whole evening. The ambience is the work; movement is just one part of it. They're giving their audiences an intense theatrical experience, and dance makes their point in a way words couldn't.

It's not by accident that both choreographers have an almost anti-dance approach. Lock came fresh to dance from a background of university studies in literature, with an interest in film. Most of his Montreal contemporaries, such as Marie Chouinard, have a similar choreographic clean slate.

Lock explains that this naivete is the result of religious strictures against dance that hung on long enough in Montreal so that few in his generation grew up in Danskins. This situation has been freeing, and many young Canadian choreographers are voracious about their newfound art. But they bring so many other interests to dance that the steps are often lost amid the smoke and mirrors.

Butoh-movement founders Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, with whom Sankai Juku's Amegatsu studied, deliberately wiped their slate clean. In a Japan devastated by World War II, neither Japanese dance and theater traditions nor those of the West seemed anything but a limitation. To come up with a new form, they went to a more primordial level of movement.

The bombing of Hiroshima seems to be evoked in the aggressive work of Ohno, and in a gentler, more lyrical way in Amegatsu's work. In "Jomon Sho," he seems to have faced destruction and gone back through evolution in search of the source of life.

One of Butoh's points is not to display a technique. But Kazuo Ohno's work, seen in New York, has its own rigor, with minimal stage dressing. And in Amegatsu's "Jomon Sho," one rarely saw a muscle ripple the smooth white surfaces of the dancers' bodies. They worked more as semaphores for an invisible spiritual effort than as individuals presenting ideas through physical movement.

La La La's exercises, on the other hand, are supremely physical. A London writer observed, "They defy gravity, common sense, and all expectations of how much work the human frame can stand." But they don't really



LA LA LAND: La La La Human Steps specializes in fast and furious movement.

go anywhere.

In the full-speed dance for the Midler show, Louise Lecavalier stormed through her usual sideways barrel turns like a torpedo. She and her partner jumped over each other's lashing feet, into each other's arms or onto the floor. But there was no change of pace. They slung themselves at each other and the camera, and then rolled away, justifiably exhausted. There wasn't a beginning, middle or end, nor was there meant to be. This was a spectacle, an explosion.

In contrast to his contemporaries, Mark Morris, whose penultimate U.S. concerts are next weekend at the Opera House, is a dance revolutionary of the old school — one who still bases his work firmly on music, with dance at center stage.

Morris too, however, is devoted to spectacle. Who could forget the confrontational theatricality of "Striptease" or the cathartic "Soap Powders and Detergents"? But at the core of each, and of his stunning "Mort Subite" for the Boston Ballet, is dance.

"Soap Powders" owed its transcendence of a mere joke about detergent ads to the heroic moment when a dancer climbed up through the arms of her fellow dancers and was borne away. It was a moment reminiscent of one in "Serenade," Balanchine's first American ballet.

Morris may not have been referring

to Balanchine at that point, but of these three new choreographers, he's the one who could. His training was in folk dance, but he also performed in an impressive array of New York companies — Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians, the Feld Ballet — before starting the Mark Morris Dance Group.

He has no more use for conventions than Lock or Amegatsu, but he works his radical changes in the movement itself.

As for dance hierarchy, where but in "Mort Subite" could you see all the Boston Ballet's upper-echelon ballerinas of the time — Laura Young, Marie-Christine Mouis and Anamarie Sarazin — on the same stage. Not only were they jogging along in the corps' identical khaki outfits; they were helping with lifts. It was as if there had been a cultural revolution at the Wang Center, and they had been sent to the countryside for re-education. They shone in new ways.

For Sankai Juku, dance is an accessory to a revolutionary-theater idea. La La La Human Steps pits dancers against music; a metaphor, perhaps, for man against his environment. For Mark Morris, dance has so many uses that it would seem he has the richest future of any of the three. Certainly he is the most revolutionary, for after seeing one of his dances, nothing looks quite the same.



MARK MORRIS: 'A dance revolution of the old school.'