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DANCE REVIEW

Children of Uganda: Young Emissaries From a Troubled Land, Joyous Still

By GIA KOURLAS



Miriam Namala and Peter Kasule during the performance by Children of Uganda. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Children of Uganda, a troupe of 22 young dancers and musicians, doesn't mess around. As soon as the curtain rose at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday night, the stage, awash in vivid blue, was a veritable explosion of frenetic hips and pulsating drums. **It was euphoric.**

The haunting paradox is found in the biographies

of the performers, nearly all orphaned by the devastating AIDS epidemic and civil war in the region. The baby of the troupe, Miriam Namala, 6, lost her father to AIDS when she was an infant; her mother is H.I.V.-positive, but in her rendition of "Titi Katitila," she commanded the stage with an uncanny maturity. Her sweet voice and slyly silky movement, executed while balancing a pot on her head, seemed to emanate from a profound inner vibration. The song she sang was about how one sleeps better after seeing a friend.

Simply but beautifully lit by Darren W. McCroom and featuring 16 scenes, the show is produced by the Uganda Children's Charity Foundation and directed by Peter Kasule, a founding member of the group, which began in 1996. Serving as an elegant tour guide, Mr. Kasule discussed the origins of dances while extolling the virtues of Uganda.

The second act, which had a tendency to drag, included audience participation: Mr. Kasule choreographed a dance heavy on arm-waving for an enthusiastic crowd of seated participants. But the show was revived in the finale, "Bakisimba," a traditional court dance that featured the entire company, hips quivering as the performers, low to the floor, shifted weight from side to side, invigorating the scene with that elusive thing called joy.

There may be charming children in the group; the girls in particular exuded a liberating power that wasn't lost on a pair of young blondes in the audience who wildly practiced some steps during intermission. But above all, this is a professional company. In none of Mr. Kasule's speeches was there a mention of AIDS. Along with art, Children of Uganda is a celebration of dignity.