



This member of the National Dance Company of Senegal portrays a West African shaman or "witch doctor."



Two male company members face off during a dance celebrating the Senegalese rice harvest.



The acrobatic "Peulhs" dazzle the audience with their gravity-defying spins, cartwheels and contortions.

African dance: The language of motion

By Emily Morrison

"Africa," wrote prominent art collector Katherine Coryton White, "is a verb to me."

Anyone fortunate enough to have witnessed the recent Nazareth Arts Center appearance of the National Dance Company of Senegal would undoubtedly agree with the sentiment expressed in White's poem, published in 1974 in *African Art in Motion* by Robert Farris Thompson (University of California Press; Los Angeles, 1974). Indeed, it's difficult to imagine this particular genre of African art in any other form than mobile to the point of volatility — particularly after you've experienced the dynamically choreographed kinetic frenzy, the riot of color and drumbeat and vibrant joy that is the wellspring of American jazz dancing, tap, break-dancing and virtually every other form of popular dance engendered by our Afro-American cultural heritage.

We've all seen these roots before: the relentless, heartbeat undercurrents of apparently gelatinous elbows and knees, slapping feet and gracefully flailing arms that describe rhythmic arcs in the air, dives and bobs and head-arm-shoulder isolations, head spins and improbable contortions. We saw these moves when former Bucket Dance Theatre member Mary Greeley gyrated across the Nazareth stage each season as if she didn't have a bone in her body; we see them when current Bucket dancer and Bessie Award-winner Steve Humphrey does his breathtakingly virtuosic leaps and turns.

When Shelley Taplin (another current member of Rochester choreographer Garth Fagan's internationally acclaimed Bucket troupe) dangles her long, graceful arms or strains the bonds of gravity with her incredible extensions, we readily imagine a tall, willowy Fulani tribal dancer like one of the women in the Senegalese company, a collection of dancers

that strives to represent and preserve authentic West African dance in all of its traditional forms.

This troupe of 40 dancers, singers and musicians appeared at Nazareth Arts Center Friday, February 14, in a 10 a.m. program presented primarily for area school children, followed later by a formal evening concert. The group's Rochester appearance was the first stop on its eleventh international tour.

In a series of dances depicting various themes of fertility, tribal mysticism, planting, harvest and exorcism, the dancers spun out their story lines to the music of such exotic native instruments as the *tam-tam*, an animal-skin drum played with hand and stick; the *balafon*, a resonant, marimba-like keyboard instrument suspended from the player's neck and played, like steel drums, with a mallet; and the *cora*, a 21-string melodic harp made from a giant gourd. As the *cora* player sings his story to the audience, he strolls about the stage, weaving his unearthly music with his thumbs on what appear to be invisible filaments. The harmonies have an almost Oriental ring to them, based as they appear to be on the pentatonic scale shared by much eastern music.

The music formed an inseparable backdrop for the incessant motion onstage. Rooted in the contagious beat of African "talking drums," the movement swelled to a crescendo of joyous, stage-filling interaction between men and women, dancers and drummers, company and audience. The arms of the drummers rapidly became a visually indivisible part of the dance, as lithe, smiling women in striped costumes and feathered headdresses beat on *tam-tams* while they swayed, sang, chanted and beckoned the audience in an almost gospel-like call that seemed to necessitate a response. Male dancers leapt out in costumes of slub-woven, un-

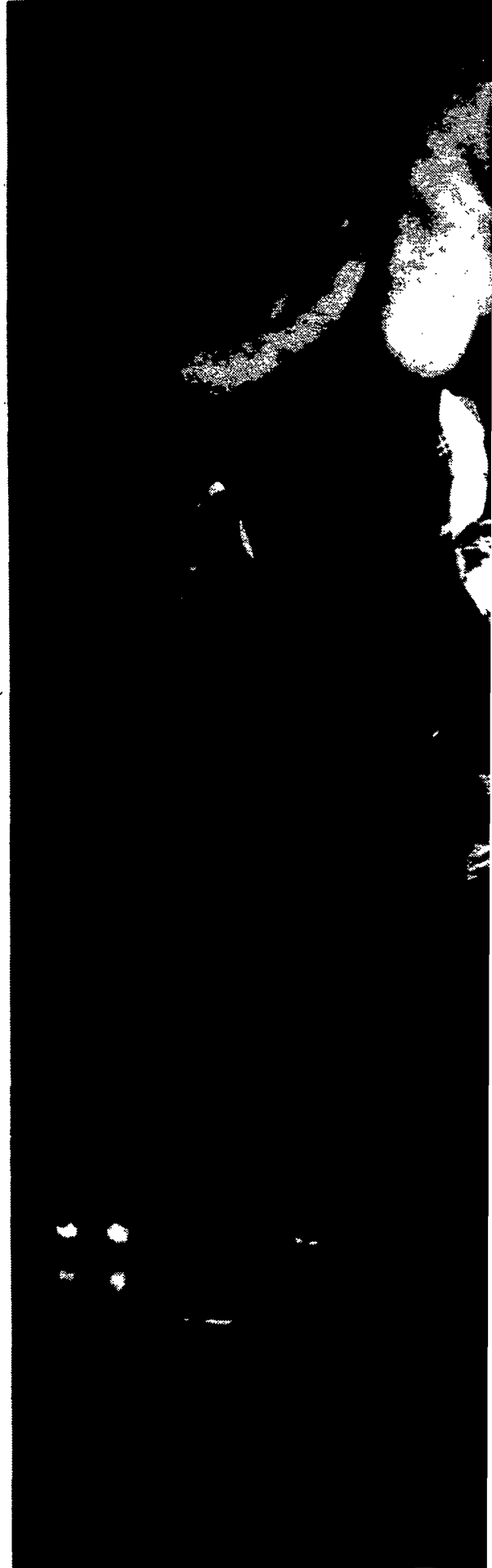
bleached muslin, accented with bright slashes of orange sash and pointed caps of woven reeds.

The brilliant plumage of costumes melded seamlessly with the great, round envelope of musical color that transported audience members far from the Nazareth stage. Liquid motion, magnified by mesmerizing sound, joined backlit shadows of dancers, projected onto the acoustical panels that line the side walls of the theater, in a shadow dance of figures larger than life.

By the time the troupe presented the second-to-last dance — a bravura display of acrobatics by two male dancers who contorted their bodies to fit into large gourds and spun on heads, elbows, knees, and shoulders in configurations that made it clear that break-dancing had its ancestral roots in West Africa — the morning's audience was clearly captivated. After a brief intermission, the dancers returned to the stage for an encore of three concluding dances, the last one a jubilant celebration of the Senegalese rice harvest.

Following the performance, several company members and their translator, tour manager Gjimo Kouyate, gathered in a downstairs auditorium to discuss Senegalese dance with a group of students from School Without Walls. The company was founded in 1960, under the auspices of the Senegalese Ministry of Culture, Gjimo explained. Each member represents one of 57 different ethnic groups, "put together into one ensemble that presents the totality of African culture." The troupe's mission, said Gjimo, is "to keep our culture alive through dance, music and sound."

Company members communicated with their translator in French, the language of the former colony of Senegal, and Wolof, the national



Break-dancing had its roots in the acrobatic dancing Company of Senegal spokesman Gjimo Kouyate, this

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