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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Ko- Thi Dance Company

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AND THE KO-THI DANCE COMPANY

By Curtis L. Carter

After 20 years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater remains a strong and popular company. Even without Judith Jamison and Dudley Williams, whose talents have been highlighted in previous performances, the dancers are exciting to watch. Their sleek bodies, representing various African, Oriental, and European-American heritages, are capable of excellent dancing. Performances in Milwaukee February 27-78 featured works by Ailey, George Faison, and Lar Lubovitch. The first night program included Faison's "Gazelle" and "Suite Otis" also including Lubovitch's "The Time Before The Time After" and Ailey's "Choral Dances." On the second evening, Ailey's "Hidden Rites" and "Revelations" were added to a repeat of "Suite Otis."

Having recently watched a performance of Milwaukee's Ko-Thi African Dancers at the University of Wisconsin Winter Dance Festival, I enjoyed the opportunity to compare Ailey's performance with the work of Ko-Thi. Immediately, I was struck with the contrast between Ailey's theatrical dances and Ferne Caulker-Bronson's Ko-Thi Dancers. Faison's "Gazelle" and Ailey's "Hidden Rites" both suggest African-like themes. Sarita Allen as the gazelle

embodies the animal-like grace and swiftness of the beautiful antelope which is known for these qualities. She is stalked by hunter tribesmen, captured, and becomes the focus of danced ceremonies. The very percussive rhythms of Ailey's "Hidden Rites" establishes a near-mechanical countenance for the dancers, and the ceremonial character of the dance remains behind a curtain of highly stylized elegance of performance. African roots are hinted at in these two dances, but theatrical polish and stylization inserts an impenetrable barrier between the feeling and the spirit of the ancient ceremonies.

While Ailey's dancers suggest African themes, Ko-Thai dancers perform authentic dances much closer to their African tribal heritage. Ko-Thai dancers are not native African any more than are Ailey's dancers, but their leader, Ferne Caulker-Bronson, is thoroughly grounded in the knowledge and spirit of African Dances. She performs them superbly, and she endows her community-based dancers with the spirit of the dances even when their dancing does not measure up to her own or to Ailey standards of technical skill and performance. The dancing of Ko-Thai has spiritual quality and a feeling of

authenticity for which Ailey's dancers substitute theatrical sophistication. Low, sweeping gestures of the Ko-Thai dancers' bodies exemplify the rhythmic patterns of the drum. Ritual takes precedence over performance and theatricality.

As the sexual rites performed by Ko-Thai become more endowed with emotional intensity, the ceremony moves closer to life and away from art as a theatrical experience remote from the main stream of experience. Even when the Ko-Thai dancers go on too long for the best aesthetic effects, the over all purity of spirit remains, and the audience somehow doesn't mind waiting for the rite to evolve to its completion.

The philosophies of the Ailey dancers and of Ko-Thai vary considerably. Ailey's thrust aims primarily at dance as entertainment, but this very high quality entertainment, with its spectacle and insight, often moves the spectator to appreciation beyond mere entertainment. Ko-Thai is grounded in a commitment to both spiritual and community values and to aesthetic considerations reflective of both past and present. It is fortunate that we can enjoy the experiences of both Ailey and Ko-Thai.