

DANCERS OF THE IVORY COAST

by

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A project is afoot in the Ivory Coast to form a national theatre, one that would include dance, drama and the making of films. Though an ambitious undertaking for any country, it is especially so for a new nation when economic, social, and educational problems loom large.

Yet this enterprise is not considered a frivolous, cultural feather in the cap. Its aim is to help create a national image; to put the Ivory Coast on the map, show its multi-faceted culture, and give encouragement to its musicians, writers, dancers, and other artistic people. As more and more contacts are made on the cultural level, nations of diverse background and training find they share a more equal footing and have better grounds for mutual understanding and appreciation.

In these early stages in the Ivory Coast, nothing concrete has been done about film making; the drama finds expression in numerous small acting companies touring in station wagons; but the dance has already come to a natural flowering, making it the most potent and exciting component in the national-theatre scheme.

Recently, Thomas Skelton, an expert in stage lighting who also has specialized in presenting Oriental and other non-Western groups to the United States, was invited by the Ivory Coast Government to tour the country and see whether the talent and experience of native dancers could be extended to the international scene.

Strange Presents Given

Mr. Skelton, accompanied by an entourage of interpreters, photographer, chauffeur, and cultural representatives viewed an existing dance company at Abidjan, the capital, as well as visiting many remote village areas. He talked with local chiefs, stayed in tiny villages, and ate unusual food. Being a special visitor, he was attended at each point by local government officials. He was feted and given strange presents (a goat on one occasion), but above all he was there to see the people dance.

And dance is the natural expression of Ivorians. They have the "echassiers" or stilt-walkers; the "jongleurs", whose participants work in a trancelike condition. There are dances that are strictly religious in nature and can never be seen by the women of the tribe, and dances that abound in fanciful and ornate costumes with equally imaginative themes. Mr. Skelton saw some performers incorporating cartwheels and flips, for the dance allows for improvisation and a free assimilation of whatever seems best at the time.

And from this tremendously varied storehouse he was able to recommend that a repertoire be drawn, a company formed, and training begin for an international tour.

One of the most effective dances was that of the Baoulé tribe entitled, "We are ants. We can go anywhere, but no one can go into us". Before this piece began, the spectators' faces were rubbed with leaves by a masked figure to purify their vision and enable them to see the dance. Then a line of men came over the bare ground in a stooping position, flexing and bending their feet to follow the contours of the earth's surface — much as each infinitesimal rise and hollow would be encountered by an ant.

Women Join Dance

Solo improvisations that followed took the form mostly of kicks, reminiscent of ants lifting their legs to hold an object. Another improvisation was provided by women who

occasionally joined the dance, regardless of the male performers, and in a stooping position made small, slow, shuffling steps. Their part was performed with such dignity and spirited concentration that to Mr. Skelton it was the most thrilling of all.

To overcome officialdom and the language barriers (French and the native dialects) Mr. Skelton found it best to go in among the dancers and musicians, shake hands, and make himself understood as best as possible. It was not easy to find a satisfactory means of communication, because in many cases the people could not understand why he asked the questions he did. "There were so many things they couldn't believe I didn't know," Mr. Skelton explained.

"I would ask such questions as, 'When is such a dance performed and why?' Or, 'What is the meaning of these movements?' And the answers were usually evasive if the movements had a religious significance; and the reply to the first question was invariably, 'They dance because they are happy.'

Mr. Skelton is preoccupied with finding out the mainspring of a dance, because although most of the folk numbers are powerful and exciting in their own locale (with many of the audience participating) they need to be cut, modified, or intensified for the stage. To do this requires an extensive background. This is one of the tasks that await Mr. Skelton's return.

Calisthenics and Ballet

There is also the question of training a company. Most of the village performers have had no formal training, their dance does not require it as such, but they have had a great amount of rehearsal and discipline. However, in order to prepare them for daily performances and give them sufficient muscular flexibility, then regular classes, a cross between calisthenics and ballet should be established.

Mr. Skelton hopes to take a teacher out with him this spring (1963). With the nucleus of a company already in mind, training of these dancers could begin at once. Then they, in turn, could teach the others. Thus, in theory, an outside teacher would only be required for a comparatively short time.

Solutions for costuming and staging have to be found as well. Grass skirts, commonly used in the Ivory Coast, are not only barred from the United States by the Department of Agriculture, but also are not sufficiently durable to withstand an extended tour. Original masks are difficult to transport because of their bulk and weight. Substitutions must be made and yet authenticity retained.

To organize a company, choose and edit a repertoire of dances, design the staging and costumes, and book a tour in the United States and possibly in Europe or South America, these are formidable propositions. Yet Mr. Skelton has several factors in his favour: good government support; an existing company in Abidjan (that may provide the nucleus for the new group); and a fascinating and as yet unexplored dance form.