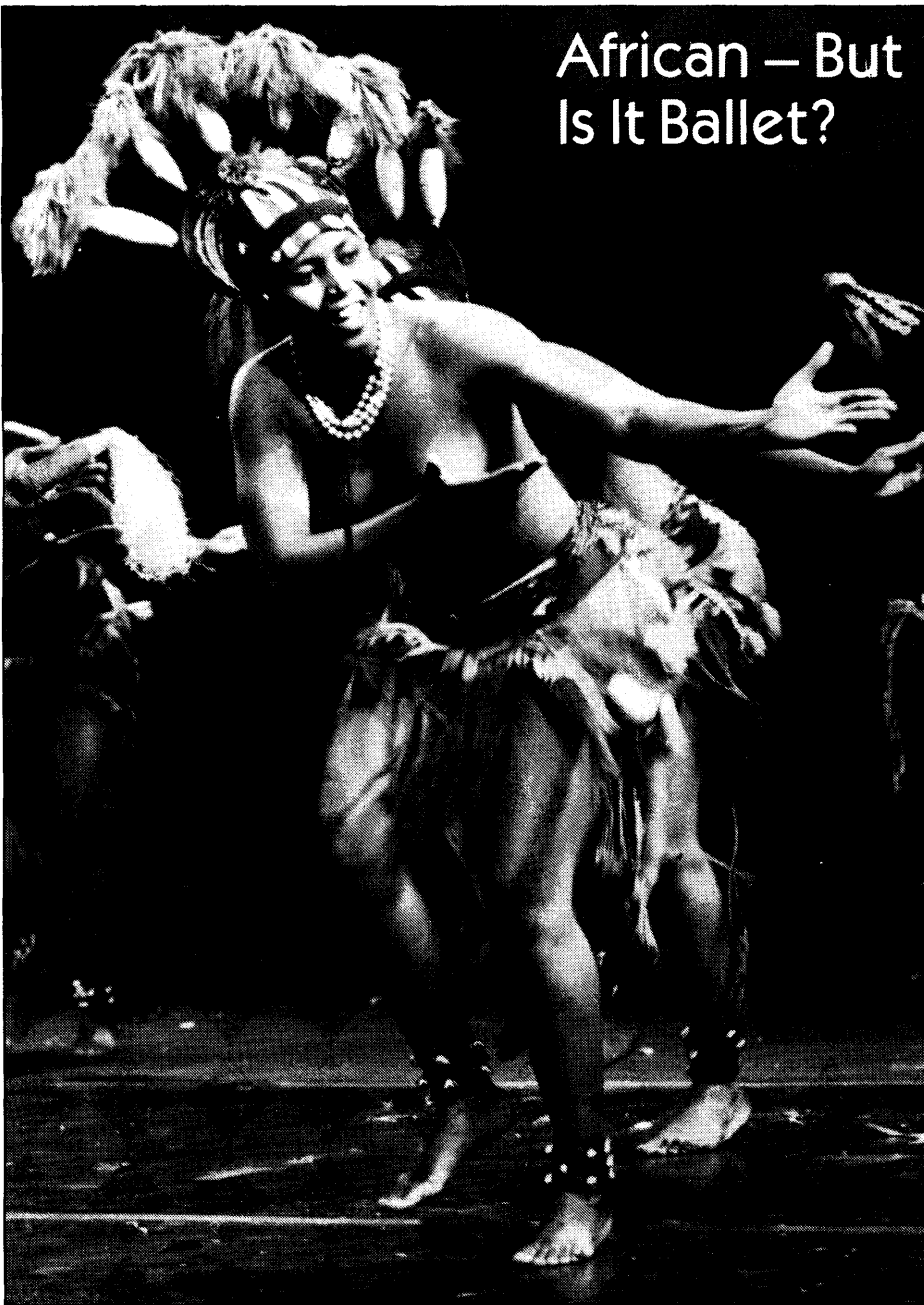


African – But Is It Ballet?



“A stunning, visually and aurally exciting show”

Alexa Dalby reviews the spectacular **Les Ballets Africains** recently performed at the Sadler's Wells, London.

It was breathtaking and spectacular, just as publicity promised, but was it ballet and was it African? Sitting next to me, my friend from Sierra Leone gave it 95% for authenticity – but this was Africa showbiz-style, polished and glossy. Yet the drumming still moved me and the costumes were a visual feast, so why the misgivings?

Set in front of an African landscape that might have been painted by Victorian

Romantic David Roberts, the show was a pulsating mixture of traditional dance, song, drama, comedy and acrobatics from Guinea's four regions, put together like a Peking Opera transported to Africa. The action is ceaseless. The five different types of drums and vigorous dancing of bare-breasted women in grass skirts and vivid head plumes of the first item give way to the meditative strings of the kora and

stately dancing of brilliantly coloured boubous and head ties, lit so that they glow and shimmer like giant grounded kites. Next comes storytelling – a Mandingo legend about the spirit of the river appearing in the shape of a hippopotamus, who is finally shot by a jealous hunter with a gun.

Significant that it is a gun rather than a bow and arrow or a spear? Change could be considered a key element in African tradition, say the programme notes. A strength of African culture could be seen to be its ability to assimilate changes and make them its own. This is already recognised in the recycling of musical influences backwards and forwards across the Atlantic. Here, with *Les Ballets Africains*, changes have been made. Traditional dances that might normally last hours have been shortened to just a few minutes, steps from different ethnic groups have been used in the same dance piece. And changes too are coming from the audience and the different cultural associations they bring to the performance. Now, the old tortoise, once the symbol of wisdom, who starts the story in the second half, has a different image – “Mutant turtles” gasped my neighbour. And were those muscular bodies flying across the stage acrobats or breakdancers?

So, even if *Les Ballets Africains* is not quite like the “Africa” I thought I saw in West Africa; even though, being European, I missed the subtleties and nuances of the drumming and dancing, it's a stunning, visually and aurally exciting, highly professional show. Equally important is its potential to make African culture accessible to a new, wider audience. At the end of the show, it was the Africans in the audience who were first on their feet to applaud so, if it met with their approval, who am I to disagree? ■

