



## Dance; Pomo Afro Homos: `Fierce' Ironies

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"Fierce Love: Stories From Black Gay Life," the stage piece by the San Francisco performance troupe Pomo Afro Homos that opened at Dance Place last night, is a hot ticket in more ways than one.

A co-presentation by Dance Place, the Washington Performing Arts Society and the National Performance Network, the work was originally scheduled for three performances, but demand was so heavy that two more were added; of the five the only one not yet sold out is tonight at 10. Last night's SRO crowd (Dance Place holds about 150), equally apportioned between the genders and colors, was unreservedly enthusiastic.

"Fierce Love" is just what the subtitle says - portraits of life among gay blacks, 12 sketches in all played without break or intermission, and prevailingly comic or ironic in tone. It's the work of the three performers who constitute Pomo Afro Homos (a whimsical logo invented by a friend, as shorthand for Postmodern African American Homosexuals), and the piece takes its dazzle and charm from their projected personal qualities. They are Brian Freeman, a veteran of the San Francisco Mime Troupe who is Pomo's director; Djola Bernard Branner, the show's choreographer and like the other two, one of its writers; and actor, singer and dancer Eric Gupton. All three are engaging, quick-witted, sharp-tongued, sassy, bright and physically deft.

The troupe started up just two years ago, has toured the United States and Europe with "Fierce Love" and a newer opus, "Dark Fruit," and this year has received, among other honors, a New York Dance and Performance Award ("Bessie").

The sketches demonstrate, with obviously conscious intent, the complexity and stratification of life in the relevant subculture, and manage to illustrate the same with a range of characters who can be as tender or bitter, as passionate or disaffected, as vain or selfless as anyone else. In an essay about the troupe, Freeman explained that the "fierce" of the title was black gay slang for "fabulous," and the "love" stood for "the ultimate love we as Black gay men sought - a sense of community."

Though the surface is humorous - and these three can be screamingly funny - the subtext is deadly serious. Inevitably, it reflects - overtly and otherwise - the ways in which the outsidership of black gay society incurs ostracism, contempt and worse from all sides. These guys are hassled not just by racist or homophobic whites, but by family members, by blacks who aren't gay and gays who aren't black, as well as other gay blacks who just aren't on the same wavelength, sexually, socially or psychologically - it's life in one big, unremitting pressure cooker. And as seems invariable with all forms of oppression, it's also a profuse wellspring of mordant wit, which is, after all, a form of catharsis and self-protection.

Some of the material is pretty thin stuff, some of it misses fire, and some of it will pass over the heads of spectators like me who are too straight, too white, and I regret to say, too old, to pick up on all the underground argot and allusions to pop-cult personalities and cliches. Be forewarned also that the show isn't for the squeamish. Aside from the generally bawdy atmosphere and the not infrequent profanity - not all that unusual in today's theater or film, certainly - there are scenes of exceedingly graphic content, involving detailed verbal and mimetic description of sexual intimacies. Whether such a degree of explicitness serves any artistic end is open to debate; personally, I did not find it, in this case, adding to my insight into or empathy with the characters.

When "Fierce Love" is on target, it has a depth that transcends its breezy facade. The keenest memory I took out of the theater was a scene that was a memoir of a friend who died of AIDS, of the pain - and succor - of witnessing the approaching end, of the thorniness of arriving at a satisfactory memorial. As in the other sketches, the tone was light and cool, the text and delivery likewise. But the truth of it was thereby rendered all the more poignant. @Slug: F08POM

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