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DATEBOOK

Celebrate Dance Festival

Opens 6 p.m. tomorrow, runs through Sunday; Balboa Park: Indoor stages at Casa del Prado Theatre and San Diego Museum of Art; Outdoor stages near Lily Pond and Natural History Museum; All events free; (619) 238-1153 or www.eveoke.org

For the annual **Celebrate Dance Festival**, a primer to keep you on your toes

By Janice Steinberg

Matt Brunson, a Del Mar surgeon, enjoys dissecting the fine points of art forms. He and his operating room colleagues can easily discuss a soprano's coloratura or the camera work in a film.

Words fail him, however, when it comes to the visceral art of dance. "I don't own a vocabulary of dance theory," he said.

That doesn't keep him from enjoying dance; in fact, he's a supporter of Eveoke Dance Theatre, the San Diego modern-dance company that produces this weekend's Celebrate Dance Festival. Still, as he wrote to Eveoke, he misses "the joy of sharing in another person's experience" of dance.

"I want to have more of a conversation than 'I liked it' and 'I liked it, too,'" Brunson said.

The pleasures — and challenges — of viewing dance are amplified by the Celebrate Dance Festival, which features 78 companies doing a dizzying spectrum of forms. Now in its 10th year, the free festival attracts some 10,000 people to sample everything from hip-hop to Balinese dance to Butoh.

Of course, you can have a great time just wandering among the four stages and watching performances "the way you'd watch a sunset," says Eveoke producer Christopher Hall. "Just let them wash over you."

If you want more context, however, here's a guide to some of the forms being presented this weekend, and some ideas for how you can discuss them with your friends:

Belly dance

Possibly the most misunderstood form, belly dance has been vulgarized as hootchy-kootchy and romanticized as a ritual to aid women in childbirth — an idea that, despite its enormous appeal as a symbol of women's empowerment, hasn't been proven by historians, according to the "International Encyclopedia of Dance."

Believed to have originated in Egypt, belly dance requires finely tuned isolations of the torso and hips. What it, thankfully, doesn't require is an adolescent figure. (In the charming Tunisian film, "Satin Rouge," belly dance is the route to a middle-aged widow's personal awakening.)

With some half-dozen troupes performing this weekend, look for differences in styles. Sahar Sami and the Glitter Dance Company evoke a Cairo cabaret, Urban Tribal blends in hip-hop, and Raks Al Nejume goes eclectic — a dancer who's a former gymnast does cartwheels.

For that conversation later over a bottle of wine, consider: Do you see the dancing as risqué or artful, and why? How does it feel to see mature dancers? What do your responses reveal about your — and cultural — notions of the body, sexuality and aging?

Butoh

A first exposure to Butoh can be unsettling. Performers shave their heads, powder their bodies to an eerie pallor,

SEE **Dance**, 28

FINE FORM

► DANCE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

and take contorted poses. Watching a Butoh performer can feel like seeing a ghost. No wonder, since this form arose in post-Hiroshima Japan.

Butoh artist Charlene Penner's Celebrate Dance solos will explore the personas of a young ballerina and a bride (she's going to wear her mother's wedding dress). She'll also perform with Eveoke.

Penner draws on her emotions, and she advises viewers to notice what emotions her work triggers. "If it's to laugh, laugh," she says. "Or if it's to feel the excitement of when you were proposed to, or the fear, whatever feeling connects with that piece."

Modern dance

The form most represented at Celebrate Dance, modern dance may be the most challenging to viewers — for one thing, because the term is applied to a range of Western theatrical dance that encompasses Martha Graham's often-mythic work and postmodernist sequences of pedestrian movement.

Although most modern dancers these days have ballet training, modern generally uses a more natural stance: no toe shoes, feet parallel vs. turned-out, and more weight into the floor. The focus is less on technical perfection than on the choreographer's ideas, and that may be where people find modern dance daunting. What does it all mean?

It's interesting to be aware of choreographers' influences. Ellis Wood, a hit at last year's festival, is bringing back her New York company. Wood is the daughter of two former Martha Graham dancers. In the case of L.A.-based Ptero Dance Theatre, artistic director Paula Present got her start with Eveoke.

With individual dances, look for an entry point; for instance, a powerful mood, a gesture that sticks in your

mind. Lower Left Performance Collective sometimes invites audiences to give feedback by writing a poem, drawing a picture, even doing their own dance. Why not try for an artistic, versus a purely intellectual, response?

Tap

The word "audience" relates to hearing, and the sense of hearing is key to appreciating a tap performance. In fact, in a workshop on tap for dance critics, the instructor had us listen to jazz improvisation and identify the melody threading through even the wildest riffs; then she made us critics stumble through a tap class, to the teacher's amusement.

Conversation starters: Tapping to the Stars does Broadway tap, with the ballet influence of a lifted torso, and the Rockette-style kicks. Hoofers House does rhythm style, à la Savion Glover — look for a more compact stance, an emphasis on footwork, and tap challenges, in which one dancer knocks out a combination and another tries to top it.

And listen!

Quick tidbits

- The "hop" in hip-hop came from the Lindy Hop, the athleticism from break dancing.
- Kathak dance originated with the storytellers of northern India. A dancer's gestures indicate specific characters or events.
- Lindy Hop dancers strive for raw energy rather than polish.
- "Talking Dance" (7-9 p.m. tomorrow) offers five brief performances followed by a conversation with several local dance critics.
- Try one of the studio classes being offered on Saturday and Sunday. There's nothing like experiencing dance in your body to help you connect with what you see on stage.

Janice Steinberg is a San Diego dance writer.



Most people are familiar with modern dance. This is Ellis Wood, who will return to Celebrate Dance this year with her New York company.
Lois Greenfield