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Keith Goodman creates a new "Sanctuary" movement

By Cerinda Survant
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Keith V. Goodman is a mercurial man who makes mercurial dances. Best known in Portland as a dancer of quicksilver virtuosity, in recent years Goodman also has been a teacher in Portland's public schools, a fashion designer, a gardener and an entrepreneur.

His dances are quick and tricky one minute, easy and smooth the next. He pulls movement out of his dancers, building on their idiosyncratic strengths and creates new challenges for them.

Goodman's latest work at Conduit, the evening-length "Sanctuary, A Spirit House," uses movement as diverse as tightrope walking and raw contemporary dance and features musical performances from Portland artists whose influences include traditional African and Mediterranean forms.

The work is highly autobiographical, though not in any conventional sense. Inspired by Goodman's trips to Jamaica and Thailand and the ritual dance traditions of other cultures, "Sanctuary" arises from his commitment to dance as the fusion of body and spirit.

He views dance technique as a necessary means to personal expression, not an end in itself.

"Sanctuary" first appeared as a work-in-progress last March at Berbati's Pan, the nightclub where Goodman worked at the time. Burned out on teaching, spending 14-hour days at the club managing and booking talent, Goodman found sanctuary in going back to dance-making.

Even after the premiere, he continued to work on "Sanctuary," and one thing led to another: A duet, "Shadow," for him and Jesse Berdine; a return to teaching and performing, this time at the newly established Conduit studio and performance space. Dealing with a studio's organizational and administrative details, activities he's only glimpsed as a company member of the Washington, DC company Liz Lehrman and the Dance Exchange: Remaking "Sanctuary" to suit a conventional theatrical space, a changed cast of dancers and altogether different music.

Like mercury, Goodman doesn't so much encounter obstacles as flow around them. "Sanctuary" counters theatrical convention in a number of ways: by creating

a shrine bearing historical artifacts and photographs of previous moments of “Sanctuary;” by setting the audience around the perimeter of the performance space; by choreographing the musicians’ relationship to the audience; by setting photographer John Klicker and his camera in the middle of the dance; and by incorporating improvisation and unannounced guest artists.

Like several other postmodern choreographers, Goodman freely uses material from other times and cultures. His work, however, is not a fashionable, politically correct, multicultural pastiche. It’s more personal, more internalized.

“There is a blending of cultures in ‘Sanctuary’ that is definitely my way of seeing things,” he says. “I take from all these cultures, I’m inspired by them. Audiences are not going to see Kumina or Buddhist dance. They’re seeing an inspiration from Africa, an inspiration from Asia; they’re not seeing folkloric work done as it would be done by people in those cultures.

“I’m using the inspiration to allow a contemporary ritual to happen. This is my form of church. And for me, that is what ‘Sanctuary’ is about.”