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Review

Dance takes flight at S.F. airport

Rachel Howard, Chronicle Dance Correspondent

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A few years ago, Joanna Haigood named one of her entrancing installations "Ghost Architecture." The title could easily describe her entire body of work. A Haigood piece is not so much a dance as it is a haunting, plumbing the spectral traces of a location's past through meticulous research. True, there's spectacle -- Haigood's use of aerial rigging sends performers scaling the sides of old granaries or crawling along the Ferry Building's clock tower. But the shock of airborne acrobatics wears off quickly as you watch dancers float ghostlike toward the earth, and the lulling effect is intentional: Haigood's work is all about calmly contemplating what has come before.



Chronicle / Darryl Bush

Joanna Haigood's entry in the international arts festival is free.

You might wonder whether she could find much to contemplate in a space as spit-shined and modern as the San Francisco International Airport's International Terminal, where her Zaccho Dance Theatre continues to perform "Departure and Arrival" through Saturday. But instead of looking back, Haigood has looked up -- to the hull-like structures that loom high above the vast lobby. These reminded Haigood of ship hulls that once carried slaves to the Americas. It's a perfect conceptual fit with the theme of this year's San Francisco International Arts Festival, "The Truth in Knowing/Now: A Conversation Across the African Diaspora." And "Departure and Arrival" made a perfectly thoughtful and thought-provoking way to kick off the festival's jam-packed 11 days on Wednesday night.

Among the large crowd, dozens of tired travelers stopped to gaze at the rafters, where a rope-harnessed Haigood slowly tumbled down toward the most striking element of Wayne Campbell's rigging design, three steel structures shaped like house frames. Below her, an all-African American cast danced on three platforms, Shereel Washington and Raissa Simpson in African-like stampings and hip rolls, Maurya Kerr and Robert Henry Johnson in a molten duet that soon had Johnson pushing her into doglike submission.

The fascinating thing about Haigood's work is how it melds place and time, and "Departure and Arrival" is a journey through both. Walter Kitundu's score begins with African drums and ominous thuds but proceeds through slave spirituals, blues and even funk, while Ricardo Rivera's video design moves from tumultuous oceans to civil rights footage. The choreography follows suit -- the majestic Washington has an arresting bump-and-grind duet with Shakiri, who's half her size -- but this is hardly a catalog of black American dance styles.

At the end of the half hour (the installation repeats in four continuous cycles), Charles Dabo appears with a traditional African water vessel, which he hands to Dwayne Worthington. Worthington pours out a bit of water before leading the other dancers inside a house frame planted on the ground. The symbols aren't

subtle -- man of the past, man of the future, a people finding shelter, returning home -- but they're deployed with Jungian dreaminess, and there's nothing ham-fisted in the delivery. A sort of solemn challenge lingers: Where will African American culture arrive next?

Perhaps "Departure and Arrival" will signal an arrival for the San Francisco International Arts Festival as well. Conceived by founder Andrew Wood as a way to promote San Francisco as an arts destination and foster cross-cultural collaboration, the audacious undertaking has seen trials and tribulations since its 2003 launch. This year's lineup, under Artistic Director Rhodessa Jones, mixes appearances by overseas visitors such as Guinea's Circus Baobab with presentations of locals such as the Robert Moses' Kin dance company.

With Haigood's dreamy "Departure" to get it under way Wednesday night, the festival looked as if it could go to great places.

Zaccho Dance Theatre: "Departure and Arrival" runs in half-hour cycles 8:30-10:30 p.m. today and Saturday at the San Francisco International Airport's International Ticketing Hall. Admission is free. For more information on the San Francisco International Arts Festival events or to buy tickets, go to www.sfiarf.org or call (415) 439-2456.

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E-mail Rachel Howard at datebook@sfchronicle.com.

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