Left: Jazzart's *Junction* celebrates dance. Far left: *Soul of Afrika* from UCT Ballet School—moody and modern

Two faces of the same dance

Ballet and modern dance allow *Chris Roper* to view artists meeting the changing expectations of audiences

Dance is an art form that is often caught doing the splits over that contentious divide between frivolous Eurocentric affectation and effective indigenous expression.

Still, certain dance companies in Cape Town have traditionally always had slightly more street cred than others. If you were a superficial observer, you'd probably identify the UCT Ballet School with gaunt ballerinas executing extremely strictured classical steps that are firmly rooted in considerations of the aesthetic. You'd also think of Jazzart as embodying a more freeflowing style that is nevertheless always very much about the serious things in life, like politics and social issues. Look a bit closer, though, and you'll find that the two poles of dance, the classical and the contemporary, actually have a lot in common.

The performances offered by the respective companies this month should go a long way towards changing preconceptions about them. The UCT Ballet School is presenting *Soul of Afrika*, an intense piece that combines animal mimicry with the sounds of the bush and traces the soul of Africa from its animals to the emergence of its indigenous peoples.

Soul of Afrika is an interesting and at times beautiful piece. The choreography is by Sonje Mayo, who was the founder of Jazzart in 1975, and Elizabeth Triegaardt is the producer. The initial performance is going to be in the Cape Town Castle, as the piece has been commissioned for the launch of a record company. Present will be a whole bunch of overseas types who will be eager to be given a glimpse of Africa.

The public performance of *Soul of Afrika* is on June 7th in the Whale Well at the South African Museum, one of the most stunning venues around. If you haven't yet seen a performance there, do yourself a favour and do so. There's something indescribably poignant about the huge whale carcasses that dangle from the high ceiling and the bones of the great mammals should provide a thought-provoking counterpoint to *Soul of Afrika*'s catalogue of animals and peoples. The acoustics in the Whale Well are interesting too, as every musical piece I've seen there has mysteriously resonated with the whale song that echoes from the speakers at other times. As well as the animal sounds, music for *Soul of Afrika* is percussion by Mandla Lande of Amampondo and the combination of drumming and bush noises should be haunting.

The Jazzart Company's offering is *Junction*, an explosive and energetic blend of movement and sound that is choreographed by Alfred Hinkel.

Despite their background as an experimental dance company, Jazzart experience the same problems as ballet companies and indeed most local theatre. It's the perennial and inelegant problem of putting bums on seats and money into the coffers. Penny Swain, Jazzart's Company Manager and, incidentally, a UCT Ballet School graduate, says that one of their strategies for winning over new audiences has been to move away from their image of always dealing with serious issues.

"I remember when we were performing *Medea*, people in the audience would turn white, women started crying, some ran out," says Penny. "We're trying to get away from that. Our style has become more vibrant, celebratory."

Junction expresses this new freedom very well. It functions as a palimpsest on which the viewer can write their own story. The set is strong on symbolic elements, such as the huge silver ball that serves as a touchstone for the dancers. The philosophical well from which *Junction* springs is one of constant re-creation, where every collision of bodies and objects provides opportunity to extend the potential of the physical and the spiritual. *Junction* is being staged at the Grahamstown Arts Festival, which starts at the end of June. ◆

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