



Nikamba
Indigenous Modern Dance
From Tabasco

Leandro Soto*

"Resonances from the Underworld," performed
at the Esperanza Iris Theater, Villahermosa,
Tabasco, April 2004.

What makes Nikamba special and unique in Mexico's dance scene are its aesthetic forms, based essentially on the visual arts, which both in Mexico's pre-Columbian and mestizo cultures are outstandingly rich and varied. The indigenous cultures have kept the visual arts alive down through the centuries, enriched by exchanges produced by both internal and external migration. Also, the visual is a very vibrant component of global culture, today valued as a discourse, a language of its own, a means of communication that involves all media.

In the group's choreography, in addition to acrobatics and dance on the stage, participants recreate corporeal groupings, visual compositions that evoke the pre-Hispanic paintings of Bonampak, the Mayan reliefs of Palenque,

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Photos by David Trujillo.

the still un-decoded symbolic figures in the codices. The group's members, based in the Tabasco town of Tamulté de las Sabanas, with their youthful, energetic presence, breathe life into something that seems to belong to the past. A similar starting point was used by the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, inspired in ancient Greek reliefs for her improvisations, or Hindu dancer Yamini Krishnamurti who as a child, after visiting with her father the temple of Shiva, full of sculptures of the dancing god, decided she wanted to dance like him.

The group uses the stage in a conceptually consistent way in all its pieces: its composition is like a painting. The dancers move from one point to another with the corporeal awareness of the visual composition they are presenting to the audience. While this is common to all dance pieces, the visual is the basis for Nikamba's work: from there the other languages—sound, music and narrative—are incorporated into the performance.



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In addition, the group's work has the definite intention of playing and recreating the scene with elements of its own culture, with the people's activities: fishing, planting, the animals, the voices of the Yokot'an language (which anthropologists call Chontal), among many other suggestions.

All of this is done with visual metaphors, with images in sequence that suggest rather than describe something specific. Using an open system of integration typical of the Caribbean—and Tabasco is part of the Caribbean—Jo-

sé Isabel Morales, known as Chabelo, the group's founder and director, incorporates music into his dance pieces from contemporary composers who live in Mexico City or Massachusetts, choruses of women's voices from Bulgaria, or rhythms from Cuba. Tabascan drums alternate with synthesized sounds and voices in the indigenous language. Even having assimilated all these facets, the aesthetic result is authentic and original. We could say that, using its region's cultural resources as a starting point, the group explores an aesthetic that fits



perfectly with the parameters of post-modernity: the local, the idiosyncratic, is assumed from the perspective of experimental, interdisciplinary art.

In the traditional context of an indigenous community, this perspective is an intelligent response to the challenge of how a culture reproduces itself to stay alive amidst the dominant process of globalization. The group is proof that it is possible to open up new ways forward and explore one's own cultural forms both inside and outside the country at a time when young people the world over are being bombarded by the media, imposing consumer tastes and aesthetics that are very often foreign to the cultural and political geography where they live their daily lives.

The group's creator and choreographer is a visual artist, a painter trained from adolescence by international masters who have come to his town attracted by the Tamultec talent for art in general and the visual arts in particular, in different techniques like painting, sketching, sculpture, Japanese Sumi-é, performance and installation. And it is from that initial training in the visual arts that the choreographic images flow.

The pieces have a visual mystery that touches the beauty of poetry. Leonardo Da Vinci was right when he used to say that painting and poetry both speak in images. Thanks to this visual poetry brought out by the participants, Chabelo creates a polysemous discourse. A good dance critic could enumerate some of the components: movements that come from yoga asanas, Tai Chi Chuan, "contact" techniques, contemporary Cuban dance and even certain elements of classical ballet. Many elements originated in the Creation Workshop of Cuban choreographer and former member of Cuba's National Ballet, Humberto González, invited to the town to set up dance workshops between 1991 and 1994. He taught the young people movement techniques, dance improvisation, Asian exercises and other disciplines for the body. Chabelo, a teenager at the time, was part of that first group.

It is well known that a work of art is more than the sum of its parts, and in Nikamba there is an aesthetic that goes beyond all the sums. This can be found in the time of the movements, in the rhythm, in the way of moving through

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space that is typical of the region: in Tabasco, the tropical temperatures do not allow for moving too quickly. The dance pieces do not contain violent movements or negative emotions; there is a unique way of moving and being on the stage. We could say that the dancers have a ceremonial attitude, a way of giving themselves over to creative work from within, from their interior beings: ceremony is essential in America's indigenous cultures. Visually, the treatment of the body—with very articulated positions—harmonizes with the proportions of the dancers' young bodies, making them look larger to the observer. One of Nikamba's artistic achievements is having crystallized an aesthetic appropriate for the body at this age, when it is still developing, and giving the town's young people creativity and discipline, on a road toward human growth through the arts. Writer Carlos Ocampo wrote in an article published in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*,

Extremely flexible, to the point of creating the illusion that they have no bones, they move like jellyfish at the bottom of the ocean. Spontaneous but well trained, the youths take over the proscenium with the wisdom of those who have always lived there....Mexican dance is enriched with a contribution of the first magnitude.

Last year, the group performed in Phoenix, Arizona, both at the State Uni-

versity and at the Phoenix Mexican Cultural Institute, as part of the celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. The impact on the community of young Mexican-Americans was enormous. The group's proposal was awe-inspiring: you can use the specific as your starting point and still be universal.

It also revealed a new way of working with roots from the indigenous vision, a way that does not deny what is current but rather appropriates it. Taking into account the age of its dancers, Nikamba is on the cutting edge of Mexican culture.

Perhaps a new tradition is being created in Tabasco, founded by the youth who want to seek self-expression without betraying their "grandparents" or ancestors, but by showing the world the creative power of their roots in a language that incorporates the new from a unique vision.

Chabelo and his group Nikamba are an example of what discipline united with an artistic vocation can do and also how important it is to support cultural and artistic projects in the communities that keep their culture alive. In today's mosaic where there is no longer "a single way of doing things," but "many ways of doing," specific voices are becoming more and more important.

This group's achievements reaffirms art as a universal language and prove the truth of the Tabascan saying that "in the town of Tamulté, anyone who doesn't paint, dances." **MM**

