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Earthy but Sad Pilgrim on a Quiet Quest for the Past

By JENNIFER DUNNING

New Yorkers finally got the chance to see performing by Germaine Acogny, the noted Senegalese solo dancer, choreographer and modern-dance teacher, on Saturday night at the TriBeCa Performing Arts Center as part of the invaluable 651 Arts "Black Dance: Tradition and Transformation" series. Ms. Acogny lived up to expectations.

Her "Tchourai," an American premiere, is a fine vehicle for her gifts. Choreographed by Sophiatou Kossoko and directed by Christian Remer, this hourlong solo is a voyage through Ms. Acogny's life that was inspired by her conversations with Xavier Orville, a poet who died in 2001.

There are no explicit events in "Tchourai," which is set to an austere evocative music and sound collage created by Étienne Schwarcz. Instead, after shedding her cloak and turban, Ms. Acogny moves about the stage with a long walking staff, a pilgrim traversing memories as if they were individual pools of light in a dim world.

She begins by sitting huddled in a back corner in near darkness, smoking from a little pipe, for a length of time that only a performer with strong theatrical instincts could manage. The stage floor-cloth suggests sand. Incense burns in a small pot. A plain wooden mask lies beside the pot. Ms. Acogny stirs the incense and picks up the mask. But these are minor activities.

Laughing and muttering, sprawling and standing, she embodies from moment to moment an almost raucous earthiness, an age-old sadness, and purpose and play. She reaches outside herself in two of the solo's most powerful passages. Picking up the mask, the kneeling Ms. Acogny holds it up, and her face suddenly becomes an eerie mask of settled pain. She walks away slowly at the end, arms outstretched, as if at the end of the journey.

"Tchourai" is a dance of immense stillness. These revisited experiences make no ripples in the pool of a stage life into which they are dropped, recalling the poetic distillation of some Japanese classical dance. There are slow moments in "Tchourai" and moments when you wonder what prompted a particular memory. But there was nothing to leave behind in this journey, on which you accompanied the formidable Ms. Acogny at her pleasure.