

Joe Goode rides high in the West atop trailblazing 'Maverick'

By Anne Marie Welsh
ARTS CRITIC

Bay Area critics are calling "The Maverick Strain" Joe Goode's best work. That's saying a lot, since Goode's wry talking dances have been highlights of many a dance season in San Diego since 1984.

Even Goode knew there was something special about "The Maverick Strain" while he was making it.

"I knew it would be a very big piece, a big, sexy installation here in San Francisco. We worked on it for 18 months," he says of the piece, which gets a local showing, beginning Thursday, at Sushi Performance and Visual Art.

Goode created it to celebrate his company's 10th anniversary last year. He had a hefty \$100,000 commission from the Pew Charitable Trust administered through the New York Foundation for the Arts.

"I felt a bit like a debutante coming out, creating for a big venue (the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts) with a big grant. I knew it would be evening-length. All that opportunity creates a kind of pressure to perform," he says.

"I wanted to approach it carefully, to take my desire to make a kind of human and compassionate work to a new level. So it comes at you from many directions — visual, textual, with lots of beautiful dancing."



MARTY SOHL

Wry desires: Joe Goode performs with longtime collaborator Liz Burritt in "The Maverick Strain."

Since he first performed at Sherwood Auditorium of the then-La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Goode has mixed text, movement and visual art in smooth, sensual and warmly humorous ways.

Language in "The Maverick Strain" is more sophisticated than usual, he says.

"One of the things I'm proudest of is a two-character play that's embedded in it — for Liz (veteran dancer Elizabeth Burritt) and me, who just talk. It's a level of writing I hadn't done before. The characters are a little more elaborated, less Joe and Liz and more objective."

Still, the work continues

Goode's transformation of nagging personal questions into dance theater. From the start, his work has been "interested in a conversation with people about social issues." Many of those works have dealt either directly or obliquely with AIDS.

His dreamlike "Remembering the Pool at the Western" (1991) resolved grief over an AIDS death into awareness of the links between all the living and the dead. His odd and evocative "The Disaster Series" (1989) used natural disasters as a metaphor for emotional upheavals; the suite's life-affirming goofiness was an antidote to dread.

Goode's company premiered "The Widows" last week in San Francisco; it's another piece that derives from growing up in an AIDS culture. Performances were outdoors on what he calls "the wind-swept moors of the beach area."

Dressed in black, their heads veiled, the dancers' performance "had a sad element certainly. But you know me — the work always has humor. I thought of this 'un-sanctioned' widowhood as interesting territory."

The AIDS theme recurs in "The Maverick Strain" when it celebrates mavericks who have battled the disease in arenas from spirituality to gay activism to alternative medicine.

One San Francisco critic, writing about AIDS-inspired art in general, said, "There is the possibility — a very strong one in the case of 'The Maverick Strain' — that some of the great dance of our

time is emerging from our own time's most staggering losses."

In "The Maverick Strain," Goode says, the two central characters "are Leonard and Dottie, very contemporary. She's a burdened AIDS caregiver. He's a flamboyant gay man. He's wheeling her to get moving again. She doesn't want to care, she wants to choose disconnection."

The larger maverick theme, however, grew out of Goode's fascination with what he calls the "icon" of the maverick, a very male image.

"I'm doing what I always do: a kind of meditation on a topic. It's not meant to be definitive. I ruminate in ways people hadn't. It does deal with connection and whether or not the maverick is capable of that."

Typically, the maverick is a kind of "John Wayne figure who goes off into the sunset by himself, a scruffy, sanctimonious, sort of sad role model: He's sort of saying, 'I'm better than being connected.'"

Part of Goode's fascination with that icon is personal. "I've been called a maverick many times. I play into that (role), I felt romanced by that phrase. But mavericks aren't big on communication, negotiation, a deep connection to others."

As usual, Goode's dancers provided many of the images in the piece. There are some "parallel stories we got from B-westerns,"

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CHRISTINE ALICINO

Goode fellows: *The Joe Goode Performance Group's Marit Brook-Kothlow and Felipe Barrueto Cabello will dance all over Sushi's downtown space.*

he says. "We riff on those — their view of women, the view of masculinity, their (ideas about) what the frontier is and isn't. The maverick is always sort of a wounded figure."

And often, he's from the West, where Goode is one of the leading choreographers. That enhanced status means Goode can charge higher fees. So much higher that Sushi, which has sponsored five previous visits, no longer can afford to present the Joe Goode Performance Group.

This weekend's performances are co-presented with the support of inSITE 97, the festival of site-specific artwork on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border. The piece itself is a collaboration among Goode, visual artist Nayland Blake, composer Beth Custer and the Club Foot Orchestra.

Like the visual artists commissioned by inSITE, Goode is tailoring "The Maverick Strain" to its San Diego locale. Members of the Joe Goode Performance Group will perform various scenes in settings in and out of the Sushi performing space before the performance proper begins.

Success story

Goode's maverick image comes partly from being on the West Coast. But as a choreographer and company director, he says, his westward orientation doesn't always help.

"The whole business is completely unworkable, particularly being on the West Coast. Is there a West Coast choreographer who has truly become nationally famous?"

Outside the circle of dance specialists, the answer is no.

"In a way we are the wild success story of the West, but we don't tour enough. If you do a lot of it — if you're out 10 to 12 weeks and have two or three performances a week, you can actually make money. But what we do — out a week, then back for three days, then out for two or three, that's grueling. And you can't earn anything."

Goode feels that what he calls "the machinery" to make dance happen just doesn't exist on the West Coast. "The conversation about dance isn't happening, among the artists, with the critics, with the public. We don't perform a season at the Joyce every year (New York's devoted-to-dance theater). We don't get reviewed regularly in the *New York Times*.

On the other hand, Goode has no desire to return East, where he worked early in his career.

"I'm very clear that I'm not moving back to New York. You decide to stay and so you take your licks. I am really interested in the process of making art, not the hustle-bustle of touring. I would like to do long seasons (at home). Performance is what makes the work smooth out and fall into place."

Goode says dance is "hard for presenters to sell. The audience just isn't coming like it once did, unless you're very spectacular, you dance with fire, unless you're 'Riverdance' or Stomp or Tap Dogs."

With overall NEA funding cut in half this year, and subsidies for presenters and for dance touring nearly dried up, Goode says dance is "hard for presenters to sell. The audience just isn't coming like it once did, unless you're very spectacular, you dance with fire, unless you're 'Riverdance' or Stomp or Tap Dogs. I'm interested in psychological depth, in asking big questions; it's hard for me to see that dance touring has become all about spectacle."

Even university presenters feel the commercial pressure, he says.

"Often they have to fill 2,000 seats. If you don't have the name recognition of a Paul Taylor or Bill T. Jones, you don't get booked. It's an almost comical position I find myself in to hear people who admire my work, or say they do, tell me they just can't book us. They can't risk losing money."

Deceptive image

But what about home? There, in San Francisco, the dance scene seems enviably healthy: three major ballet companies (San Francisco Ballet, Oakland Ballet, San Jose-Cleveland), four nationally known contemporary companies (Goode, Margaret Jenkins, Alonso King's Lines Contemporary Ballet, and ODC/San Francisco), plus at least a dozen reputable others.

That's a mirage, Goode says. "There's duplicity there. There are the main four of us that do all right, though we have our ups and downs. Then there's everybody else. There's no support to keep broadening the pool. Some of that work is very interesting. Some is crap, of course. But there's good work being done in garages, on the street, and it doesn't get support."

The scene continues to burgeon, he says, but many people are back to doing the work strictly for the love of it. "They've decided it's not possible to consider dance as a profession. They'll do it for a few years with a passion. Then for a few years maybe on weekends, while they work. And then they give it up."

Goode says such resignation may have "released people to do exactly what they want, really do-

ing their own thing. There's something good about that. What saddens me is that the dance world doesn't get to grow from it."

Sounding weary, he says of his nearly \$400,000 annual budget: "It's a lot of money to raise every year."

Despite the drawbacks of working in California, Goode says that West Coast dance is definitely achieving its own identity.

"Lifestyle is so important here. When you meet people, they ask what is it you are into. In New York, it's 'What do you do?' The emphasis there is on achievement goal orientation. Here, people are looking for alternative answers — in healing, in medicine, and sexuality. That makes for a certain approach to work that is lifestyle-inflected."

By comparison, on the East Coast, dancers are "much more connected to a Eurocentric ballet model — it's more hierarchical and autocratic."

And so, whatever the consequences, Goode is going to stay put, a maverick who needs to question that strain in himself, an artist who's become one of the best of the West.