

African dance at Lied

By Josh Krauter

Staff writer

Lincoln audiences will have a rare chance to see an authentic African dance and music performance tonight at the Lied Center, 301 N. 12th St.

The Ballet d'Afrique Noire's "The Mandinka Epic" tells the story, in song and dance, of the Mandinka people and the Mali Empire of West Africa from the 12th to 15th centuries.

The performance is based on oral stories passed down through the generations.

"The show is based on the history of the people and the history of their tribes," said Charles Bethea, executive director of the Lied Center for the Performing Arts. "Like any folk tale or folk idiom, it's a blending of what they're doing now and what has happened before."

Those folk tales and idioms were a big part of the Mandinka culture. The Mandinka's storytellers, called griots, were famous for passing down the legends and history of the Mali Empire, the cultural and financial center of 12th- to 15th-century Africa.

One legend even has the Mali Empire landing on American shores several years before Columbus.

The ballet's theme is the Mandinka's struggle for power and the building of their civilization once they had that power.

In addition to stories and history, the music of the Mandinka was important to the culture. The Ballet acknowledges all of these cultural elements in its 30-member troupe, which features dancers, singers, musicians and tribal instruments, including many types of drums and a 21-string harp-lute. Jean Pierre Leurs directs the performance.

All songs are sung in the Mandinka people's native language. Much of the music and dancing are traditional and are based on the historical period featured.

Bethea said the performance will be a visual and musical treat.



Courtesy Photo

DANCERS FROM THE BALLET D'AFRIQUE NOIRE will perform tonight at the Lied Center for Performing Arts. The performance is a tribute to an important period in African history that spans from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.

"It's going to have a lot of energy, a lot of culture and it will be a visual as well as a musical experience," he said.

Bethea said the stage show will be lavish, but more so because of the performers than the stage setup.

"It's mostly about the performers, the costumes and the lighting," he said.

Bethea said the Lied Center hasn't had many authentic African productions.

"The (Ballet's) agent came to me and said, 'We have this really authentic, high quality, drumming, dancing and singing group.' I thought it would be good to do, since we haven't done many African shows."

"It's going to have a lot of energy, a lot of culture and it will be a visual as well as a musical experience."

Charles Bethea

executive director of the Lied Center

Bethea said many truly authentic African productions haven't been available to Western audiences, let alone to Nebraska.

Though the performance is in another language and deals with the history of another culture, Bethea said Lincoln audiences will have much to

appreciate and learn from the show.

"I think they're going to be beautifully entertained and get a taste of (African) culture, a sense of what another culture is like," he said. "I hope that if international music and dance appeals to you, you'll give it a shot."

Ballet d'Afrique Noire "The Mandinka Epic"

WHERE: Lied Center for the Performing Arts, 12 & R streets

WHEN: tonight at 8
COST: \$32, \$28, \$24, half price for students

THE SKINNY: Music, dance and history of West Africa come together in ballet.

"The Mandinka Epic" kicks off at 8 p.m. Pre-performance talks in the Lied's Steinhart Room begin 55 and 30 minutes before the show.

'Mission to Mars' grounded by weak plot

By Mike Callahan Jr.

Staff Writer

Some couples dance and some go to Mars. Some just wasted twelve bucks.

The potential was there for acclaimed director Brian De Palma's latest work, "Mission to Mars," but despite the foundation of a plethora of Hollywood hot shots, the film never quite gets off the ground.

Set in the very near future, 2020, a NASA crew blasts off to make history by touching down on the red planet.

The mission is led by astronaut Luke Graham (Don Cheadle). He is leading the mission only because his best friend, Jim McConnell (Gary Sinise), is still mourning and accepting the death of his wife, Maggie, a fellow astronaut (Kim Delaney).

Following a successful landing, a phenomenal dust storm emerges, wreaking havoc upon the crew. So NASA is forced to schedule a recovery mission.

In comes the recovery crew, including an ambitious Jim McConnell to be put to the test, utility youngster Phil (Jerry O'Connell), Woody Blake (Tim

Robbins) and his wife Terri (Connie Nelson). These two love bunnies would be the smoochiest couple in the history of NASA, but realistically they never would be put on the same mission.

Possibly the lamest of the lame occurs when Jim is watching a tape of his deceased wife on the way to Mars.

She's at a party with a roomful of astronauts hanging out together, and she stands up as the party goes into complete silence and gives a disgustingly philosophical and deep spiel about life. Give me a break; nobody does that. In real life she would have been drunk, shooting eight-ball or dishing out seductive looks to her husband.

Of course the recovery mission has some life-threatening moments of its own. De Palma loves suspense, but it just doesn't get you like his past work.

The cast is wonderful, but unfortunately you could have thrown Frank Stallone into one of these roles, and it wouldn't have made any difference. This was Robbins' worst role since "Cadillac Man." O'Connell had the only role that was the least bit appealing.

Unfortunately, "Mars" screenwrit-

MISSION TO MARS

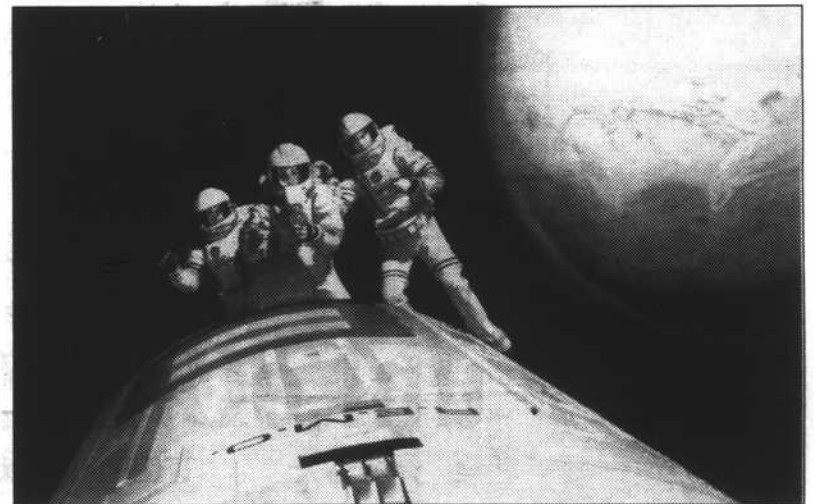
STARS: Jerry O'Connell, Tim Robbins, Gary Sinise, Don Cheadle
DIRECTOR: Brian De Palma
RATING: PG (mild violence)
GRADE: D+
FIVE WORDS: Mission to wasting your money.

ers Jim Thomas, John Thomas and Graham Tost did a beautiful job of writing the most generic and uneducated sci-fi blah I've seen. Not much homework was done.

The closest you get to any skilled acting opportunity was a challenging array of facial expressions through those helmet visors. Just kidding.

Despite a lack of dialogue, substance and acting opportunity, "Mars" is visually stunning at times. From the impressive dust storm to a lovely sequence where Woody and Terri have an intimate dance in zero gravity, "Mars" tends to yank you back in just when you're about to write it off completely.

Maybe Hollywood just is running



Courtesy Photo

DR. TERRI FISHER (center), played by actor Connie Nielsen, aims to fire a life-line wire for a fellow crew member in the movie "Mission to Mars."

out of ideas in the sci-fi genre, but I think it all boils down to the script on this one. In the film "Contact," the female lead works her entire life and the entire film in order to make contact with another life form, making it bitter-sweet in the end.

In "Mars" it's almost too easy, making it anti-climatic. There's another life

form, and the astronauts meet up with it. Big deal — they gave that away in the previews.

It's a given that the film will make truckloads of cash, but a rental of "Contact," or the granddaddy of them all, "2001: A Space Odyssey" would be much more fulfilling. Hell, just rent "Space Balls" and go home happy.