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## Review/Performance Art; Gentle Souls of Gay, Black Defiance

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

For a group that straddles the cutting edges of racial and sexual politics, Pomo Afro Homos, a trio of black gay male performance artists from San Francisco, is a remarkably low-key ensemble. Even when mouthing the rhetoric of defiance and challenging black institutions to face up to the reality of the AIDS epidemic, the attitude of Brian Freeman, Djola B. Branner and Marvin K. White remains more friendly than threatening.

"Dark Fruit," the show they brought to Alice Tully Hall on Friday evening as part of Serious Fun is a collection of six satirically edged sketches and monologues about black gay life and the myths and attitudes around it. The most touching section, "Sweet Sadie," is an autobiographical monologue by Mr. Branner about growing up with a mother who many years later developed Alzheimer's disease. Playing both himself and his mother, Mr. Branner evokes a complicated mixture of devotion and resentment for the woman whose ruby red lipstick he used to put on for Halloween parties. Mr. Branner is not a charismatic actor, but his gentle, heartfelt memoir conveyed a stinging poignancy.

The show's sharpest humor was in its opening sketch, "Aunties in America: Epiphanies 'n' Roaches," which was written by Mr. Freeman. The skit imagines a catty tea party at which the black gay characters from the shows "Six Degrees of Separation," "La Cage aux Folles" and "Angels in America" gather to compare notes. After describing themselves as "Hattie McDaniel Meets Mandingo," they turn themselves into stereotypical black mummies.

Some of the show's most promising material was too slackly directed to make an impact. The most ambitious section, "Black and Gay: A Psychosex Study," is a rambling reflection on race and sexuality that the trio performed as a goofy, loose-jointed sendup of a scientific lecture.

In the first part of the sketch, Mr. Freeman plays a sexologist quoting from a bogus 1960's treatise on homosexuality among black men. Filled with data about the "Negroid homosexual male's" superior skills at assimilating into white society and illustrated with vintage physique photos, the lecture was presented as a comic example of exploitation masquerading as science.

It segued into a re-enactment of a story about a bright, black high school student from Shantytown who is sexually pursued by a white classmate. Caught rejecting the student's advances, the black youth is accused of being the seducer and loses his recommendation for a scholarship. Done in a broad cartoonish style, the fable emerged as little more than a curio.

In the final segment of "Dark Fruit," the group addressed black churches, Afrocentrists, AIDS organizations and all those who they say tend to deny the existence of black homosexuals. Their tone was more huffy than enraged. Answering any and all critics, they evoked the legendary French singer Edith Piaf as a sort of patron saint by adopting "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" ("I Have No Regrets") as a motto. That was also the title of a poem by Dave Frechette from a recent collection of writings by black gay men.

Formed only two and a half years ago, Pomo Afro Homos are smart, engaging and talented. On Friday they also seemed uncertain about how deeply they should delve into the very volatile territory they have chosen to explore.