

LA WEEKLY

Rehearsals for the Future



Steven Arnold, impresario of razzle-dazzle

When Steven Arnold exhibited another in his series of artistic visions at Gomorrah Borealis, Parachute's fashion show at the Palace last spring - staging the extravaganza with ballet dancers instead of models, using trial masks and headdresses as well as modern fashions, and incorporating hypnotic choreography and ritual, all to an epic musical score - I wondered what was next. It was obvious he wouldn't remain L.A. "best-kept secret," as Pleasant Gehman labeled him in this column last summer, for long.

And sure enough, an elaborate press package was soon distributed, full of drawings, photos, detailed plans and the preliminary script for a fashion/stage show of overwhelmingly grand scale created by Steven for the inauguration of the World Memorial Hall in Kobe, Japan, sister city to San Francisco. The press kit was from Shi Yu Chen, ex-artistic director of the China Club. Steven Arnold, it said, had joined forces with Takeo Kikuchi, a fashion designer, and Ryuichi Sakamoto, late of Yellow Magic Orchestra and co-star in and composer of the soundtrack for *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Together they had created *Cosmopolis*, the story of the birth of a city of the future, incorporating a cast of 400, including masked ballet dancers (even a ballerina from Russia's famed Kirov), motorcycle gangs, L.A.'s Pop Lockers, and Harlem's Professor Geoffrey While and the Soul Stirring Crusade Choir.

To give you an idea of this latest manifestation of Arnold's "nouvelle Baroque" (his description) apocalyptic vision, here's a brief description he wrote on his sketch of the final scene: "The hall fills with a snowstorm of gold and white. (This from an avalanche of glittering confetti.) The choir sings. The Poppers dance. The models parade. The floats open. (Like roses; inside are staircases filled with models.) The winged women descend. The music soars." And a huge three-storied city of glittering gold towers arises from the ashes of two declining societies.

But perhaps I should have started at the beginning. From the script: Act I. Overture. The audience enters World Hall under a grey, murky light. It is just light enough for people to find their seats. Onstage, covered in grey scrim, is a huge package, ominous, as is the music that has been playing throughout. A feeling of confusion mixes with anticipation. Performance begins. At the computer-synthesizer cockpit, a robot in the image of Ryuichi Sakamoto is seated. Synthesizer lights flash. Slowly, a speaker tower descends from the center and Big Brother's voice speaks. "Our brothers, you have, avoided seeing the future and only analyze the past to project it into despair. We only exist in the future. The reality is a delayed shadow of substance trying to discover the future..."

The story, written by Steven, is of two warring societies. One destroys itself; the other creates idealized robots who become humanized through the intervention of angels. The first society, a mass of performers in red costumes that reverse to blue and green, is transformed into a sea of motion, over which ride five floats, unfolding as they approach the golden city.

Arnold with open arms. His production was given a budget of more than \$1 million. Japan believes L.A. is a city of the future, says Arnold. "They think it's really happening. They are fascinated by L.A. artists in particular." Steven hopes to bring Japan to tears with this one: "I wanted to create a miracle that would really affect them."

Steven, who is from San Francisco, first gained critical acclaim in 1972 in Cannes, winning the "new director" award for his film *Messages Messages*. He moved to Los Angeles in 1977 and began working largely in video and photography. *Reliquaries*, a book of sensual photographs- each as magnificently staged and costumed as *Cosmopolis* will be - was published last year.

Steven's preoccupation with photography began in his teens. A fascination with the stage began much earlier. "As a child I put on marionette shows," he says. "While the other boys played sports I played in my theater, making costumes and sets. This is just an extension, but with real people instead of dolls."

Cosmopolis will be staged twice, each time before an audience of 10,000, on October 9. Steven will bring home videotapes of the event.