

Doug Varone and certain trends in contemporary modern dance

Andrea Grant-Friedman
28 March 1998

Doug Varone and Dancers, as they recently demonstrated in performance at the Joyce Theater in New York City, exhibit some of the most well defined technical and physical elements that have emerged in late twentieth century modern dance. Varone's work typifies to a large degree the extraordinary technical peak that the modern dance world has reached. At times, however, this choreographer's work falls victim to one tendency inherent in the very same development—the pouring of great amounts of physical technique into works that then become overly dominated by that technique.

Much of Varone's choreography is performed at a fast pace with fascinating level changes. All of his dancers exhibit extraordinary dynamism—an ability to hold on to the integrity of a physical line while moving at considerable speed, both as solo performers, as well as in partnering situations. Most significantly, however, Varone's choreography, at its best, truly outshines his contemporaries in its examination of the most complex and intimate human emotions, emotions that are all too often treated in a trite or perfunctory manner by other artists in the field.

The company's recent program at the Joyce Theater displayed both the strengths and weaknesses of Varone's work.

Home, choreographed by Varone in 1988, is a deeply moving and timeless piece. Set to the music of A. Leroy, two figures, Doug Varone and Gwen Welliver, are costumed to resemble an average middle-aged American couple. The piece is staged so that from the vantage point of the audience member it is as if one is peering unseen through the couple's window.

Home explores with a unique simplicity the tension and complexity, sadness and hope, that is involved in relationships. The moments when the two dancers,

seated side by side, rise and fall in cannon and in response to each other, exemplifies the type of stage presence demanded from the dancers, as the uncomplicated movement is purposefully revealing. As the couple chase one another across the stage in circular patterns with their chairs held to their backs, slamming them down in one spot only to rise and begin again, Varone successfully recreates the playing out of a domestic quarrel.

Home is one of the most accurate depictions in more recent choreography of love and the dynamics that emerge from the commitment of two individuals to one another. Varone's choreography defies the popular romanticized portrayal of marriage and challenges the conception of the easy, complacent life, unfolding behind closed doors.

Bel Canto, a world premier, was similarly perceptive. A work of bright colors and spirited music, Varone's choreography reaches a high point by capturing without banal imitation the humor involved in, what is in this case, a gay couple's flirtatious interactions. However, like *Home*, the work succeeds because of its ability to portray the larger and universal aspects of such a relationship.

Possession and *Mercury*, the opening and closing works of the program respectively, are exciting explorations of the dance medium. *Possession* is riddled with soft lines and a melting quality. *Mercury*, on the other hand, replaces the easy feeling character of *Possession*, with movement of a greater intensity—the dancers strike into the space with limbs and torsos, creating linear shapes in one instant only to move out of them in the next. Both are representative of the wide range of movement types in which this choreographer is able to work. At times, with the numerous duets, trios, quartet and quintets counterposed to each other in

the stage space, as well as the movement quality, the pieces seem to drift off into obscurity. There is simply too much going on and it is overwhelming. This characteristic serves to give the works an unfocused feeling.

Nonetheless, Doug Varone is certainly one of the more interesting choreographers to have emerged in the past two decades. Having performed himself primarily with the Limon Dance Company and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company from the late 1970s into the mid-1980s, Doug Varone has come of age in a period of modern dance imbued with a high level of technical and formal skill, but lacking to some degree in substance.

The best of Doug Varone's work distinguishes itself because of the choreographer's ability to incorporate the major aesthetic developments of the modern dance field with a thoughtful and penetrating examination of the many components of the human condition.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact