

Insightful, engaging modern dance

Doug Varone and Dancers at the Joyce Theater, New York City

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11 January 2000

Doug Varone and Dancers began their season at the Joyce Theater in New York City this week with a remarkably ambitious program, including three New York and two world premieres. The company, bearing the name of its artistic director and founder, is known for what is often described as the distinctly “humanist” orientation of its choreography. The four pieces performed by the company on opening night ranged from the comedic to the disquieting. Each was insightful and engaging in its own way.

Agora, the piece that opened the evening's program, displayed both restraint and sensitivity in its movements. Skips, turns and lunges slipped into one another in a calm flow, moving the dancers in and out of shifting groups. Mid-level leg extensions bent and pulled the dancers around themselves, i.e., around their own axes, adding a circular momentum to the choreography. Costumed in white tunics, the seven performers adopted a casual gait to move in and out of movement and around the stage. The dancers' tendency to gaze downward lent an internally focused quality to the dance. Hiccup-like freezes occurred throughout, catching the performers in mid-motion. Shifts in the intensity and breadth of the movement, and the skillful lighting of designer Jane Cox, allowed the dance to progress through the various moods suggested by Julia Wolfe's accompanying original composition. While the dancer's stage presence was somewhat lacking, the shifting relations between the bodies produced, even during slower sections, a rush of motion that was absorbing.

The playful and empathetic character of the human portraits that Varone created in *Bel Canto* (1998) emerged once again in his newest work, *Polonaise #44*, which had its 2000 World Premiere this season at the Joyce. Taking its name from the Chopin composition to

which it is danced, Varone's choreography had a musicality that allowed the dance and the music alike to find new expressiveness. Performed by Gwen Welliver and Varone, the latter's thorough immersion in the work strongly enhanced the emotional content of the duet's teasing touches, small gestures, lunges and circling walks. As the dancers recreated the behavior of a young couple, Varone's choreography explored the naiveté, nervousness and comical posturing of budding relationships.

Bel Canto, reviewed by this writer during Doug Varone and Dancers' performance at the Joyce two years ago (see: Doug Varone and certain trends in contemporary modern dance, [28 March 1998] <http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/mar1998/dnce-m28.shtml>), remains a colorful and comical work—a perfect way to close an evening. The dancers' shed some of the nervous reserve that seemed evident at the start of the evening, allowing them to perform movements that demanded precision with comfort, obvious pleasure and humor.

The highlight of the performance, in my view, was *Eclipse*—choreographed in 1999 and also a New York premiere—by far the most penetrating and evocative piece. The dance begins with three figures upstage center in a horizontal line facing the audience. They appear transfixed by what is before them. A spotlight—perhaps a searchlight or the sun—shines from behind the dancers, capturing them in silhouette. Air-raid sirens wail.

Initiated by the dancer in the center of the trio, the three performers reach their arms out to one another with a mechanical slowness. They seem drawn into one another. The center dancer turns upstage, throwing her arms up and breaking the unity of the trio. This sequence occurs repeatedly at various times in the

dance with some variations. The choreography suggests both a deep connectedness and remarkable tension. As if pulled in by what is happening to them, even if they move away momentarily, the dancers continually converge into a trio. A rounded angularity, in which the natural suppleness of the bodies and the kinetic of the movement softens the overall shapes, permeates the entire work. The dancers' riveted gaze adds to the powerful performance.

One gets the sense that the three figures have witnessed some tragedy; as they watch, they become what they see. The relationships among the members of the trio seem to express mutual dependency, rejection and longing. Above all, one feels deeply disturbed. The mood is dark and unsettled. The work closes with the center figure from the trio dropping into the floor. She is apart from the others and yet tied to them. Lying on her side, she raises a leg with a flexed foot, seemingly independent from the rest of her body, and stabs into the floor. The stage goes black. Varone's choreography possessed an originality that was penetrating, creating a dance that speaks to the many things that both compel and haunt us.

In addition to the dances on this program, Doug Varone and Dancers will perform *Rise* (1993), *Tomorrow* (2000, World Premiere), *Sleeping With Giants* (1999, New York Premiere), and *After You've Gone* (1995) while performing at the Joyce this week.



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