

Trisha Brown Dance Company: Just scratching the surface

The legacy of Postmodernism in contemporary dance

Andrea Peters
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Over the first weekend in February audiences in Southern California had the opportunity to view recent work by Trisha Brown—the most widely acclaimed choreographer to emerge out of the “Postmodern era” in contemporary dance. Performing at UCLA’s Royce Hall, Brown’s company of nine dancers presented “El Trilogy,” pieces set to original scores by jazz composer Dave Douglas.

Indeed Brown conceived of “El Trilogy,” comprising of three distinct works interspersed with two solos, as a homage to jazz. Although she developed the piece in part through watching early film footage of Lindy hoppers at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, “El Trilogy” does not recreate scenes or mimic dance moves from the jazz era. Rather the artist’s aim seems to have been more intent on capturing the musical form’s spirit, mood and ability to set the human body in motion.

Brown’s work is both fluid and highly structured at the same time. In “El Trilogy,” for example, the dancers’ backs are almost always in an upright position, with movement emanating largely from the limbs. These impulses then carry the body into more angular shapes, neatly curved forms, directional changes, and light runs. The movement style is also marked by an endless number of weight shifts—lunges, shifts and slides—that force the dancers to quickly move their weight from one balance point to another. This demands an extraordinary sensitivity to timing. And in “El Trilogy,” the dancers perform with ease and gentle grace, appearing to glide through space.

In part, the unified quality of the artist’s movement vocabulary may stem from the way in which Brown is known to develop her movement vocabulary: through the gradual building of patterns, so that sequences are created by adding new actions onto a phrase of movement continuously repeated from the beginning or a midway point. Because the eye sees an evolving set of patterns, the choreography is easy for the viewer to absorb. Yet a dance can also be very diverse because there is no limit to the number of sequences performed or dancers onstage at any given time.

Brown’s choreography has a genuine formal aesthetic cohesiveness. The spectator is made to feel, by the careful choices through which the choreography is constructed, that the performance is the work of someone with a highly refined intellectual sense of movement—i.e., a clear movement vocabulary.

At its simplest, there are two fundamental aspects of

choreography. The first of these can be conceived of as an artist’s movement vocabulary: the specific set of movements that an individual body is instructed to perform. The second aspect deals much more with the overall composition of a dance: the number of bodies on the stage, interactions between dancers, the creation of patterns of people in space. It is at this level that the thematic content of a work gets most clearly worked out. At the same time, in order to develop those themes, the choreographer uses his or her movement vocabulary to determine how ideas will unfold through the instrument of the human body.

While Brown’s choreography may hold together well on the level of movement vocabulary, “El Trilogy” is lacking in the second aspect of choreography. The first and the third works in the piece, *Five Part Weather Intervention* and *Groove and Countermove*, seemed to be largely without purpose.

Various groups of dancers move in and out of formations—most often in patterns of vertical lines. Entrances and exits occur, duets meld into trios, which shift into group sections, and on it goes. On the evening this reviewer was present, by and large the dancers looked disconnected from one another and positively bored.

The costumes, varying from sharp yellows to pastels to soft grays, were extremely pleasing to the eye. But after a while the performance experience begins to remind one of watching a group of exotic fish in an aquarium—pretty colors, elegant bodies, lovely waves, but not a great deal going on.

Not only did both works appear to be entirely without structure, they also seemed to bear no relation to the supposed central theme of “El Trilogy.” *Five Part Weather Intervention* and *Groove and Countermove* seemed more like interesting exercises for Brown, who has never choreographed to jazz before, than any sort of attempt to explore her subject very deeply.

The second dance in “El Trilogy,” *Rapture to Leon James*, was more engaging. The work was designed as a tribute to a well-known Lindy Hop “caller”—the dancer who initiates steps that others have to follow. Brown’s choreography captures the mood of a swing club in a unique and convincing manner.

Two women enter, humming softly to themselves. They swivel their hips and pull them through light, ever-so-slightly seductive steps. More dancers enter. They create lines and move into circular, grapevine-like formations. Out of the activity, the caller emerges and the dancers play a version of “follow the leader.”

They shake their hands and subtly toss their bodies. The music is fast and without strict rhythmic formation, so the dancers bring forward a hidden pulse within the music by carefully coordinating their steps.

While the dance is interesting inasmuch as Brown uses her distinct movement vocabulary to tap into the spirit of the jazz scene, *Rapture to Leon James* fails to explore anything terribly complex. There are two basic moods in the dance, soft and sensual and fast and playful. After exhausting these motifs, Brown seems to have little more to say. Unfortunately, the dance continues on for several more minutes.

The *Interludes*, the solos that separated the major pieces from one another, contained some of the evening's most interesting work. In *Interlude 2*, Mariah Maloney begins onstage with a full-sized aluminum ladder hanging horizontally across her shoulders. She dances with her unwieldy partner, unfolding its metallic limbs, climbing through its bars, and balancing herself across the harsh looking ledges. At any moment the viewer feels the object could collapse around Maloney or scrape her with its hard edges. In the background, the stagehands are changing the set, preparing for the following piece. Coolly, calmly, Maloney finishes her work and leaves without exhibiting a trace of concern.

In this piece Brown successfully captures the contradictory feelings of vulnerability and perseverance that naturally arise out of negotiating life's numerous obstacles. The choreographer has produced something very evocative. But the fact that this solo is presented merely as an "interlude" seems to indicate that Brown herself is not aware of what she has stumbled upon. Perhaps, for her, it was merely an exercise.

The limitations of "El Trilogy" highlight some of the problems inherent in the so-called "Postmodern" tradition in contemporary dance. The choreographers from this period, often called the "Judson era" after the Judson Memorial Church in New York City which was the staging ground for much of their work, rejected the tradition that had formed the core of modern dance during the first half of the twentieth century. They opposed the idea that dance had to be based upon well-codified technique, clearly defined content, structured themes, theatrical ornamentation and stage bravado that had informed the work of artists like Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and other predecessors.

Generally speaking, the Judson choreographers did not feel that dance had to be animated by ideas about the world, whether they were of a broadly social or a more personal character. Following in the tradition pioneered by Merce Cunningham, improvisation and spontaneity became both the means and the ends of choreography. Dancers and non-dancers alike engaged in performances, thereby blurring the divide between dance and pedestrian movement. Often shows occurred in non-traditional spaces, such as parks, houses or buildings.

Choreographer Yvonne Rainer articulated the manifesto of the Postmodern era in modern dance as follows:

"NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer

no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved."

The choreography of this period and the experimentation associated with it led to a critical expansion in the boundaries of dance. This allowed for a flourishing of creativity in the formal sphere, by expanding the realm of what was possible.

The choreographers of this period, some of whom were active in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s, saw their work as the embodiment of the spirit of protest in the artistic sphere. However, whereas in the outside world millions of people were grappling with historical questions of immense importance, the Judson choreographers rejected any engagement with those questions in their art. Instead, they largely turned inward.

The Postmodern choreographer was to be free from communicating, expressing or grappling with any ideas except those concerned directly with dance itself. Finding meaning or logic in a piece was left to the viewer's subjectivity. The Judson artists absolved themselves of any need to explore and comment upon the complexities of modern life and work through difficult social ideas. Their "protest" was of a rather limited quality.

In the end, it is fair to say that this celebration of formalism contributed to the resurgence of precisely the technical virtuosity and spectacle that the Judson choreographers so strongly decried, but now clearly dominates in modern dance. However, today's dance world is still living with the legacy of the Judson era in one crucial respect. While many contemporary artists may have rediscovered the virtue of technical prowess that marked the works of modern dance's earlier choreographers, by and large they have not rediscovered the concern with the social world and universal human experience that also defined the works of those founding figures.

As a participant in the Judson era, Brown made many lasting contributions: one of her most famous pieces was the 1970 *Man Walking Down Side of Building*, in which an individual (attached to various mechanical devices) descended the face of an apartment complex. She has developed since then in noticeable ways. Today Brown's choreography has an aesthetic richness, manifested in her historical curiosity and concern with theatricality.

However, in general, Brown continues to cling to the formalism of the Postmodern period. "El Trilogy" clearly demonstrates this. Above all, the three dances formed an artificial grouping, linked together by a purely formal aspect of choreography—the fact that they all made use of jazz music. Outside of this experimentation, it appears that Brown had little else to say about the supposed subject of her dance. In an entire evening's work, she did not explore in any great depth the artistic or social complexities associated with jazz.



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