An evening with Nederlands Dans Theatre II

The challenges confronting contemporary modern dance

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"Real art can never escape from life. In histrionic terms, illusions are not false impressions or misconceptions of reality. The world of illusion which the audience expects from the artist is, in fact, the world of their real selves, the image of their own world, the translation of their hopes and fears, their joys and sufferings into the magic of the stage."*

Charles Weidman 1966

(*The term histrionic here is being used as a synonym for theatrical or dramatic.)

When Charles Weidman, one of the leading figures in American modern dance, stated that "real art can never escape from life," he summed up the primary challenge facing the dancer and the choreographer in the making of a dance—to find and articulate the connection between the seemingly individual feelings and ideas that serve as the immediate inspiration for the dancer's movement and social reality at large.

In taking up this challenge, choreographers and dancers today, like all artists, face the additional pressure of an environment, created over the past few decades, in which individualism, self-absorption and political reaction have come to dominate. In addition, because the physical instrument employed in dance is the human body, the art form has certain tendencies towards turning inward—towards making the individual both the subject as well as the object of the dance. Individual psychological and emotional states are often explored, not in connection to, but at the expense of, the contradictions of social life.

One symptom of this larger problem is a general preoccupation, throughout the dance world, with physical capacity and technical prowess. Generally speaking however, in the process of making a dance, artists respond to these social and artistic pressures in different ways and with varying degrees of success.

On April 13, Nederlands Dans Theater II (NDT II), the Nederlands Dans Theater's company for dancers between the ages of 17 and 22, performed at Los Angeles' Royce Hall. One of the leading modern dance companies in the world, NDT is comprised of three separate troupes, NDT I, the main company, NDT II and NDT III—for dancers 40 years and older. This pioneering organizational structure ensures that dancers are provided with a performance setting designed to support and advance their work at different stages in their careers.

Despite the obvious talent of the NDT II dancers and the three choreographers whose works were performed—Jiri Kylian, Johan Inger, and Ohad Naharin—each of the pieces on the program manifested, to varying degrees, the pressures referred to above. The dances either avoided probing too deeply into their subject matter or, at worst, were downright self-indulgent.

Jiri Kylian's *Sechs Tanze*

The first dance of the evening was the work of NDT's leading choreographer and artistic advisor, Jiri Kylian. Set to Mozart's German Dances, *Sechs Tanze* is a light-hearted and playful portrait of the interactions between what appear to be young aristocrats in 18th century Europe. Clad in white dressing gowns, white face makeup, and, for the men, white-powdered wigs, the figures rush about the stage.

The dancers move in and out of duets and trios with angular, pulsing arm movements and hops in second-position plie (a dance position in which the feet are angled outward, the legs are spread slightly more than shoulder-width apart, and the knees are bent). The dancers tease each other—entangling in brief moments of intimacy, which often quickly turn into a ruse. Although imbued with a certain childlike innocence, the dancers' interactions communicate an underlying sexual tension and a certain vindictiveness.

The image created by the white costumes is broken by the seemingly inexplicable entrance of bodiless black ball gowns, which speed across the stage with an otherworldly fluidity. At one point, one of these black figures enters the stage, this time filled with a person. Carrying a sword and an apple, the gown's occupant slashes at the head of a neighboring smaller black dress. The companion appears to be decapitated. The aggressor takes a triumphant bite out of the apple. Power and callousness briefly emerge as the dark underside to this playful world.

Like the slightly malicious taunting between the dancers, however, this intriguing contrast to the apparent cheeriness of the dance is not expanded into anything more substantial.

Sechs Tanze is a pleasant enough piece, but it lacks genuine substance. Although Kylian succeeds in extending Mozart's melodies into movement, there is no significant thematic development after the first five minutes. Kylian ceases probing precisely at those points where his most strenuous efforts should begin.

The superficial interactions and physical flirtations of young 18th century aristocrats could be the starting point for a sharp, comical and insightful exploration of the broader psychological, emotional, and social dynamics lying beneath them. We get a glimpse of these in the brief decapitation scene. But this is as far as it goes.

Sechs Tanze premiered in 1986. In the program notes, Kylian makes the following observation about Mozart's work, which clearly inspired the dance.

"Two centuries separate us from the time Mozart wrote his German Dances. A historical period shaped considerably by wars, revolutions and all sorts of social upheavals. With this in mind I found it impossible to simply create different dance numbers reflecting merely the humor and musical brilliance of the composer. Instead I have set six seemingly non-sensical acts, which obviously ignore their surroundings. They are dwarfed in face of the ever-present troubled world, which most of us for some unspecified reason carry in our souls."

These are the words of an artist who is aware of—and affected by—the

immense social transformations since Mozart's time and who wishes, in exploring the composer's work, to make it resonate with modern audiences.

But Kylian seeks refuge from this challenge in the "non-sensical." Instead of attempting to unearth the connection, through dance, between Mozart's music, the world today, and the "social upheavals" of the last two centuries, his art "ignore[s] [its] surroundings." Such a starting point cannot take one very far.

One gets the sense that Kylian himself feels "dwarfed in the face of the ever-present troubled world." Despite his professed desire to do more, Kylian's *Sechs Tanze* ends up merely reflecting "the humor and musical brilliance of the composer"—precisely what he set out to avoid.

Johan Inger's *Dream Play*

The lighthearted frivolity of *Sechs Tanze* was quickly overshadowed by the intensity of the second piece, Johan Inger's *Dream Play*. Choreographed to Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring), a challenge taken up by numerous choreographers over the past 90 years, Inger's work deals with the emotionally tumultuous dreams of a young man.

Propelled into a fantasy world by the sight of a captivating woman on the street, the young man, accompanied by other figures, is overtaken by a dance that at times becomes almost frenzied. It is always masterfully contained, however, by the power and singular purpose of the dancers' bodies. Matching the audacity of the music, the performers crouch, march, stamp and plunge through the space, using the full weight of their bodies to create momentum. Unrestrained turns whip them around the stage.

Two women enter—the woman who earlier caught the young man's attention, and a commanding, slightly malicious figure, who works to obstruct the young man's affections.

Somehow the young man and the first woman end up in a small, restricted space, with a wall behind them. They begin a duet. Their limbs stretch out, yawning and dipping into spirals, leans and lifts. The very rhythm of the music seems to find its way into the dancers' breathing, as they resist and cascade into one another. Gentle in their interactions, they appear frightened and almost tortured by something unfolding outside their little walled-in world. They are gripped, and at times even battered, by Stravinsky's music.

The dance eventually ends with the young man shuddering into wakefulness from his dream.

Inger's choreography is, on an aesthetic level, extremely beautiful and captivating. He uses repetition, unison movement and clear spatial organization to lend coherence to rapid and rhythmically complex movement. At its best, the dancing is as forceful as Stravinsky's score, making *Dream Play* visually penetrating. But this achievement is not matched by thematic sophistication. Inger falls short in exploring the intricate ideas and moods that drive the music.

The story is rather simplistic: love at first sight, love impeded, love realized—a theme that is too formulaic, too passive for Stravinsky's score. The sense of protest so profoundly expressed in Stravinsky's work—of Spring battling in its efforts to prevail—finds no outlet in Inger's dance. The choreographer uses the young man's return from the dream world to put a clamp on the tensions created in the dance.

Ohan Nagarin's *Minus 16*

The third piece was the work of Israeli choreographer Ohan Naharin. *Minus 16* is a collage of different sections taken from some of the artist's previous works. Unfortunately, unlike a rock music album, dances are not well served by this sort of "Greatest Hits" approach.

The different parts of the dance bear little relation to one another. The accompanying score, a mixture of Latin ballroom dance tunes, traditional Israeli music, spoken word and techno, was equally unsuccessful. Instead of thinking through the development of his own work and how it might be expressed in a single piece, Naharin seems to have simply slapped together whatever has been lauded in the past.

Minus 16 begins during the intermission, when a single female dancer, dressed in a man's suit, mounts the stage and, in front of the still-drawn curtain, begins to groove to quiet Latin music. This is a charming and disconcerting scene, both because its timing is unexpected and because one feels a bit like a "peeping-Tom"—staring into the bedroom window of someone letting loose in their own private world.

From here, *Minus 16* traverses a number of different motifs; a chair dance in which the dancers sit and pitch their bodies around the seat; an individual improvisation; an audience involvement section; and, last and worst, a "Danceathon" exhibition of virtuosic feats, which culminates in a pyramid of bodies, reminiscent of cheerleading spectacles at football games.

Minus 16 is self-absorbed. In one section Naharin has the dancers record statements about themselves. Each one then performs an individual improvisation, accompanied by this score. Some say their names and make a short statement about why they dance. This is more successful. Several others just say their names, repeating them, screaming or laughing nonsensically. The dancers appear infatuated with themselves and absorbed in their own novel worlds. Nothing seems to exist except their names, their voices, their lives. While bringing the dancers' voices into the score is an interesting idea, with the potential of enabling the audience to relate to the cast in a more intimate manner, the *Minus 16* recordings have the opposite effect.

Of all the dances on the program, *Minus 16* was most symptomatic of the wider problems facing contemporary dance. There is no shortage of talented dancers. The bodies of the young dancers of NDT II are exquisite instruments of discipline and expressiveness. Not to sound clichéd, the dancers dance their hearts out, in the best sense. They are inspiring. But these extraordinary qualities are, in the final analysis, stunted, because they are devoid of an artistic outlet that gives them broader significance.

Choreographers and dancers alike, like artists in every field, must turn to the social world around them—its history, contradictions, tragedies, and possibilities—in order to genuinely penetrate "the world of their real selves" and illuminate "the image of their own world."