

Pictures in a '90s Album



PAUL WOLNIK

Formal adoption: Wendy Whelan, Alexander Ritter, and James Fayette in Jerome Robbins's 2 & 3 Part Inventions

By Deborah Jowitz

New York City Ballet
New York State Theater
Through February 26

Stephen Petronio
Company
Joyce Theater
January 31 through February 5

It was inevitable that Jerome Robbins's 2 & 3 Part Inventions, choreographed for students of the School of American Ballet, would be adopted by the parent company. I had faint misgivings, imagining that the modest, touching diligence of the gifted young dancers might be replaced by a knowing professionalism.

At its NYCB premiere, the ballet looked beautiful and the dancers like angels at play in Bachian gardens. But there was a difference. Those gardens, fresh, cool, and spring-raw when the SAB kids strolled in them, now have an early summer glow (and I'm not referring to possible changes in Jennifer Tipton's fine lighting). Everything is full-blown, the dancers bigger and bolder in space. At its premiere, the ballet reminded me of Robbins's 1945 *Interplay* (also for eight dancers), but an *Interplay* whose images of youthfulness were there naturally, unstressed. Now its more mature manners hint at intrigues.

Although there's been no loss of ease, of the simplicity without complexity that captures Bach's tone, we see the ballet differently. (One of the thrilling things about watching dance is finding how performances alter our perceptions of choreography. "That was always there?" we ask ourselves.) In a passage of happy imitation, Ethan Stiefel seems to be looping the music around Wendy Whelan. When she moves on to dance a silky adagio with Christopher Wheeldon, he watches quietly, then catches Jennifer Ringer. Stiefel's musical phrasing, his understanding of space, connect the two encounters, bringing an extra glow and intelligence

to the lovely steps: he makes the dancing offer Ringer garlands, form arbors around her.

The outdoor images are irresistible. Alexander Ritter and James Fayette smoothly succeed each other in offering support to Whelan, one slipping in as the other steps away. As the two of them carry her off, she inclines her head slightly as if looking into a pond.

In earlier years, Robbins often divided men from women. Men were bolder, more aggressive, women delicately dreamy or perky in a self-aware way. 2 & 3 Part Inventions doesn't deny ballet's traditional gender roles, but neither does it emphasize them. The dancers step into the musical patterns with a happy adventurousness that makes them equals. I've also on occasion found certain Robbins steps too cute—for instance, the way he launches men into skipping, one knee drawn high, one arm raised. There's none of that here. The walking game that Miranda Weese and Samantha Allen play—treating Bach's notes as stepping stones—and the men's tight little you-go-up-I-go-down quartet come across as pleasant but demanding musical pastimes.

Shortly after the premiere of this ballet, the company promoted Ringer and Ritter to the rank of soloist, and made Stiefel (along with Albert Evans) a principal. I can understand why. The very generosity of Stiefel's dancing makes him almost too much of a star in 2 & 3 Part Inventions. And Robbins's choreography brings out a gentleness and freshness in Wendy Whelan that I haven't seen before. Her neck seems longer and her shoulders easier. She looks tranquil and open and glad, less driven by the whirring of her phenomenal technique.

Speaking of formidable technique, how splendid to have Merrill Ashley back in *Ballo della Regina*. These days, we don't often get to see a NYCB dancer in a role Balanchine created on her. In this world of women marching, cleav-

ing the space in flying pairs, Ashley is the intrepid exemplar. Whipping off her dazzler of a solo, with what firm mastery she picks out unaccented beats, flexing and pointing feet like steel springs! Without any loss of graciousness or composure, she pirouettes and whangs a leg out to one side. My kind of queen.

"Welcome to the '90s!" Stephen Petronio's dances shout to me. "Think you can take it?" In his world, fragmentation results in seemingly fortuitous adhesions. If you didn't presume a searching rehearsal process, you might imagine he stuffs his themes into a cyclotron, and out spin variations.

The speed and ferocity of his movement, unfettered by narrative, serve neither crude violence nor sensationalism. Instead the choreography seems to speak of instability, unrest, heroism under fire, and dangerous beauty. From his dances, I take away images of dancers whose limbs seem to

whirl in their sockets. The complicated order of actions—say, a dancer's straight arms slashing, her leg hacking out a big semicircle, her body dropping forward only to be yanked up by a whip of her head—becomes so condensed that you can barely absorb it, yet nothing blurs. If the sensibility weren't so different, I'd be tempted to compare the effect to woodcut illustrations of the early 1930s, landscapes of darting lines.

Yet all is not strident. For one thing, the choreography is resilient, springy, yielding to gravity if to nothing else. As early as the 1986 *Walk-In* (revived this season), Petronio experimented with letting a strike melt, his hands curling into flowers. His dancers sometimes collapse briefly forward, or unmoil—the way a puppet, its strings slightly released, can curve into lewd postures.

To watch the new *Lareigne* on the same program as *The King Is Dead* takes strength. The themes and the ferocious energy are simi-

lar, even though the ambiance and configurations are different. Nothing hints at content the way Cindy Sherman's fantastic slides color *The King Is Dead* (bandaged heads, giant eyes, eyes whose pupils bleed landscapes—all oval-framed within their rectangles like ghoulish family portraits). Instead of the costumes that hint at mummy wrappings, Manolo dresses the *Lareigne* cast in filmy white half garments, with a laced panel of white satin fronting the men's undergarments, as if they were corseted from chest through crotch. Ken Tabachnick's lighting sometimes suffuses the stage with blue gloom. After a sensational, devastatingly difficult solo by guest artist Jeremy Nelson (I think he did it twice) to Gary Gilmore's "No More Heroes," David Linton's powerful and drastic score cuts loose—in its quieter moments seeming to ask insistent questions, at other times punching at the dancers as they fall.

The piece is full of clusters. I see wonderful Kristen Borg as if through trees—except that these

Dance

human trees are superlively. All six phenomenal performers (Borg, Gerald Casel, Ori Flomin, Rebecca Hilton, Mia Lawrence, and James Robertson) dance in a loose clump. One sees a path and darts through; it'd be like a chess game if every piece weren't moving simultaneously. From time to time, the scrappy and frenetic choreography just stops, and the dancers freeze long enough for you to wonder about them. Once, everyone stands in a neutral position, but Flomin is caught with one leg off the ground, tipped against Hilton. When the movement starts up again, she turns him by putting a hand behind his neck and clamping it around his face.

This dancing—it truly looks death defying—clamps its hand around me, too, exhilarating me, devastating me. ■

Recognize the Real

By Thomas DeFrantz

In a corner of Philadelphia's Old City, at the hip-hot Painted Bride Art Center, an overflow crowd cheered as Joan Myers Brown kicked off the eighth conference of the International Association of Blacks in Dance. It's all good, I thought, basking in the positive vibe a multicultural, Afro-interested crowd brought to a long weekend of performances and panels. The annual event has the festive flavor of a family reunion; more than 300 brothers and sisters turned out to witness the expansive range of black dance styles, and to support sister Joan, director of host company Philadanco.

No secret that the family tends to cluster around big name companies (Alvin Ailey and Dance

Theatre of Harlem), even when the hometown crew is fierce in its own right. IABD concert organizers will have none of this. Philly groups shared the stage with regional headliners, the sleek glamour of Philadanco next to the military bounce of a Gombey dance performed by the National Dance Theatre of Bermuda. Deep commonalities and potent diversity came at us in shared programs.

An evening devoted to "Men in Dance" featured the blockish phrasing of soloist Niles Ford; the hip hop, gang-banging men of Rennie Harris; and the subversive vocalizing of Hot Mouth. Harris, one of Philly's own, dedicates his stylized club choreography "to dancers and hustlers who were murdered on the streets." His current work builds upon rituals of

the 'hood: grabbing one another's shoulders, six young men in oversized plaid shirts, baggy jeans showing boxer shorts, and sneakers greet each other, claim the stage space before they dance. George Clinton's P-Funk warns the boyz up, stylized popping and step-show rhythms develop, and we enter the temple of dance that risks all to define the Real. How about a slide on the head, across the stage, followed by a headspin and freeze? Inseparably flamboyant and cool. Harris's street style reveals obvious conceptual links to several African forms showcased in the next night's "DanceAfrica America." to the steely precision of Donald Byrd's deconstruction of *Giselle*, and to the politically charged theatrics of

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Galactic Tidings

DEFRA NTZ

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the L.A. Contemporary Dance Company.

Harris stood for the hip hop nation all alone: panels constantly fussed about how to bring young people into the fold. But dig that the program selection committee burrushed experimental modern dancers. Tyrone Aiken, a 32-year-old artistic director whose Brooklyn-based Ethos Dance Theater Company didn't make the cut, credits the oversights to a lingering dichotomy between community and art. "There's a new sense of community among young artists—Ron Brown, Reggie Wilson, Marlies Yearby, myself—and a new story to tell. Where are the pieces addressing issues such as sexuality and AIDS?"

Not on display by the larger companies, which have survived against all odds—25, 30, and even 35 years of presenting modern dance and ballet in the African American grain. Dallas Black Dance Theatre, Dayton Contemporary Dance Co., and Denver's Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble all showed gems, pumped to the bumps by wildly enthusiastic audiences. Dayton diva Sherrill Williams threw down ancestral memory in Bebe Miller's *Things I Have Not Forgotten*, her luscious vulnerability tempered by simmering calm.

Generational competition is legendary in dance, and the new breed works hard for props. Elders fear that core concepts of community and history disappear in the experimental work of younger Downtown artists. But Winifred Harris, artistic director of L.A.'s Between Lines (which didn't per-

By Mindy Aloff

The National Ballet of Senegal
Brooklyn Center
for the Performing Arts
January 19 through 22

Jennifer Monson
P.S. 122
January 19 through 22

If a committee of conquering Martians—seeing that Earth had no International Endowment for the Arts and recognizing a chance to pull off a major public relations coup—sat me down at a public forum and demanded that I come up with an explanation for why human beings watch dance and why theaters and presenting organizations ought to be supported, I would talk about the National Ballet of Senegal's recent appearance at Brooklyn College. The first thing I'd say is that I have no idea why human beings, debatably the most

perverse life form on the planet, do anything that makes them happy. I would add that they should not be encouraged in this unwholesome happiness, which deludes them that they might be happy again, at ticket prices they can afford.

Then I would point out the blemishes of the concert. First, the title of the revue ("Pangols—The Spirit of West Africa in Music, Song and Dance") actually describes the event: an anthology of dancing, singing, and percussion as villagers practice them, arranged for the proscenium stage. I would note that the performers were too good: the polyrhythms of the dancing were too complex and fluent, the dancers sang too well, and some of the musicians were also acrobats. Furthermore, everyone was appallingly good-looking, and the stage design, representing a village over a great tree towered, the sun caught in its boughs, was simply too elegant and appropriate. The virtuosic stilt walkers and the gigantic danc-

ing spirit made of straw were charming in the worst way. All this stimulates a desire for more beauty, more skill, and more fun in human beings of the middle-class persuasion at ticket prices they can afford. I see that the first funder listed by Brooklyn Center is the National Endowment for the Arts. Martians, take heed! Don't give one red cent! There was a dance for a corps of women wearing nothing on their breasts but the stage lighting! I can't tell you how they looked. (This is a family newspaper.) But imagine it—women with breasts! It's mystifying that those 2000 men, women, and children in the audience weren't storming the box office to get their money back.

Enough entertainment: on to art. Jennifer Monson's *La Mer* has nothing to do with Debussy, although the score, by Zeena Parkins, does sound like a portable radio playing in a trunk underwater. The piece lasts half an hour, longer than the running time of

Concerto Barocco. Unlike choreographers who believe dancing comes in through the eyes, Monson makes work that might as well be telecommunicated. Her dancers are less interesting to watch than members of the audience. There is a male-female duet in *La Mer*, an owl-and-pussycat sort of thing (they have one ring between them; he wears it in his ear); and four women tumble about in a flotsam-friendly manner. Two lighting designers, credited with helping to put over Anne Thulin's concept of turning P.S. 122 into a magic box, subvert the proceedings with professionalism.

The choreographer's solo in silence, *Loof*, features a long movement phrase in which Monson keeps dropping floorward, almost breaking herself. Ah, but not quite. Monson is also funded by the NEA. Her audience was far smaller than that for the Senegalese, yet just as enthusiastic. Venusians, no doubt.

form), sees herself as part of a new wave of storytellers working firmly within the tradition. "It's understandable in a sense, because they're trying to keep the history of where we started from alive. They're concerned that everyone is breaking away and trying to forget what happened. But the next storyteller who comes along tells the story in a different way."

AIDS continues to slam the black dance community: all the original male members of New York-based Forces of Nature have passed. Cleo Parker Robinson

stressed the responsibility of companies to get involved in the education of young artists as they develop sexual identities: men need men as models and mentors. Homophobia rages among African Americans, and the larger companies fear severe booking and ticket-sales backlash from a "mostly gay" tag. But AIDS won't wait, no matter how slowly honest and frank discussion drips down. At the closing ceremonies, master choreographer and activist Eleo Pomare testified that "10 per cent of the people who are here today

will not be here at the next conference unless we act up and act out." Tell it.

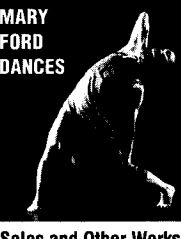
Leaving Philly, I imagine black dance at a crossroads. To the right, established institutions—Rod Rodgers, Eleo Pomare, Philadanco—sustain the shared memories of African Americans. To the left, postmodernists—Urban Bushwomen, Dwight Rhoden, Jubilation!—deal with issues of social rage, gender, molestation. Straight ahead looms Mother Africa, the source and spirit for every rhythm sounded by Muntu Dance

Company, Chuck Davis African American Dance Ensemble, Women's Sekere Ensemble. Carmen de Lavallade flashes in my mind, hair down and attitude flying, sizzling through Milton Myers's *Ain't No Way*. On closing night, de Lavallade presented an award to her cousin Janet Collins, the first African American to become a prima ballerina (at the Metropolitan Opera in 1951). Not so long ago there were no roads open to African Americans in concert dance. Now there are several. We've got to keep on moving.

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