

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

Dance/Movement: The Spanking New and The Tried and True
by Lisa Jo Sagolla

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To ring in the new year, I decided to take in both the old and the new. I attended two hefty dance concerts: a program by the New York City Ballet featuring four old favorites dating from 1956 to 2002, and Dance Theater Workshop's Fresh Tracks, an evening of six brand-new pieces, all by relatively unknown choreographers. I hate to draw pessimistic conclusions about the future of our art form, but while the seasoned ballets proved devilishly delightful, the new works, though sometimes fresh in concept, were too undercooked for audience consumption.

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'Fresh Tracks'

At the risk of sounding like an old schoolmarm bemoaning how kids aren't taught English grammar anymore, which is why their writing is so bad, I feel I must register a similar complaint about young choreographers. Based on the works presented in Dance Theater Workshop's Fresh Tracks (Jan. 4 and 5), it seems young dance makers aren't taught choreographic craft anymore, which is why their choreography is so boring. An imaginative concept, striking vocabulary, charismatic performers, or a timely message by themselves do not constitute interesting choreography. In order to make an engaging dance piece, a choreographer must create and structure movement in a way that will snare and sustain an audience's attention. To do so involves giving serious thought to the principles of dance composition, which, though they have changed as postmodern values have replaced modernistic or expressionistic ones, can still be found to govern any effective dance work, regardless of style or genre.

The most promising work on the program was the opener, Rebecca Serrell's "Native (the earth is plastic)." A fierce solo, it begins with Serrell appearing to be blown onto the stage by raging winds. She then employs tiny vibrating motions and huge athletic bounds to portray the forces of nature at work on her body. The vocabulary is exciting, but the piece loses momentum - - and we lose interest -- when Serrell starts to act out an incomprehensible story that involves fiddling with a big branch.

Also partially successful was Shannon Gillen and Elisabeth Motley's butoh-inspired trio "Five Hundred by Fives." Though the work is physically well-designed, with graceful movement phrases sporting lots of kinetic variety, it is impossible to "hear" the choreography's statements, as they are overshadowed by the sound of an annoying monologue by a young woman waiting for a guy to phone her. The piece ends powerfully, with a horrifying murder, but the event is so ineptly set up that the impact is almost negligible.

Maggie Bennett and Otto Ramstad are tantalizing performers, yet the solos they offered were tedious. Based on interesting concepts -- hers, "Motherland," on the confining nature of a homemaker's lifestyle, and his, "Hello Nervous System," on the sensations of the human nervous system -- the dances never develop beyond what feel like exploratory exercises. Yet another solo, "Bags," choreographed and performed by Jibz Cameron, is mildly humorous in its use of recorded dialogue to give voice and oddball characterizations to a group of bags placed in a semicircle around the center of the stage. Cameron's interactions with each bag, however, are overextended in light of the work's simple theme of the frustration of always having to answer to the wishes and demands of others.

The program closer, "The Shape of Things to Come," a quintet choreographed by Milka Djordjevich in collaboration with the performers, conveys a futuristic tone. The dancers seem to be humanoids of some sort, yet devoid of the emotional and intellectual aspects of human beings. Composed with no sense of phrasing, the choreography alternates ferocious jolts of movement with periods of stillness. If its title is to be believed, the work puts forth a disturbing message: The future holds nothing of interest.

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