

Climbing the Ladder

BY LINDA BELANS

There was an air of expectancy when the American Dance Festival presented its "bonus babies," the Young Choreographers and Composers project, July 10 and 11 at Reynolds Theatre. These are the men and women chosen from a field of 80 choreographers that a panel of selectors believes might make an important impact on the future of modern dance. Past recipients of similar encouragement are Twyla Tharp and Laura Dean, two dance makers who have, indeed, "made it," and Jan Radzynski, Paul Taylor's acclaimed "Profiles" composer. Marlene Pennison, a 1981 "Emerging Generations" discovery (a parallel program), was invited this season to perform at Reynolds Theatre, the next rung up the success story ladder. Filling a house at Page is the final ADF triumph.

The Young Choreographers and Composers program grew out of a workshop seven years ago with process, rather than performance, the objective. The new program was funded to upgrade the level of participation and to culminate in performance. This summer Pooh Kaye, Mark Morris and Stephanie Skura with Michale Kosch, Herschel Garfein and Frank McCarty, their respective composers, were chosen for the four week residency.

Pooh Kaye/Eccentric Motions (aptly named) presented us with "Wild-Fields." A most unusual aspect of this piece is that the floor is its focus. The six dancers (including Kaye) primarily dance on all fours, altering their use of weight to yield to and to defy gravity. Like cats who shoot straight up in the air, they spring to standing positions, then return to the earth to cavort jauntily among each other. They make "whoosh" sounds with their mouths occasionally, adding to the organic quality of this delightful piece. It was clearly and carefully constructed, allowing us to sit back and enjoy this quirky little tidbit.

Structured even more tightly, creating a spare, austere tone was Mark Morris' "Forty Arms, Twenty Necks, One Wreathing." Sixteen dancers (Festival students) wearing only black unshiny leotards act as corps to Morris and his three other company members. The large group creates clear-cut angles, works on all spatially grounded levels, makes minimal gestures and stampedes in sweeping circles. These well rehearsed dancers move around and with the gym-short clad, t-shirted four pivotal

dancers. The form of the dance echoes the tight structure. The corps always appears as a unit enveloping the quartet, which is quietly making shapes in its predictable diagonal line. The human element is consciously absent from this geometry lesson, focusing our attention on shape and speed. This piece had the texture of a basic recipe to which no spices or herbs have been added so that we might taste only the main ingredients.

Adding a wonderful quality to both Kaye's and Morris' dances was the live orchestra under the baton of Stanley Walden, the co-director of the project.

At the opposite extreme of tightly-knit, product oriented choreography is Stephanie Skura's "Climbing the Waltz." This rambling work, more a theatre piece than dance, seems mostly about process. Bits and pieces of steppy movements chop their way through many truncated ideas, separated by as many black-outs. Dancers sit on chairs and look at us in anticipation of performance; the orchestra assembles on the stage; the musicians feign rhythmic problems; Fred Holland does a long, smooth repetitive solo; Yvonne Meier tells us a joke in German at the side apron microphone... During one of these interludes Skura confides that she never could really tell a joke and rarely gets them either. Her piece conveyed the same effect; a poorly told joke I couldn't get.

The real star of Skura's show was McCarty's music which overpowered her work, partly because of its unidentifiable form and because Skura choreographed the musicians' numerous physical transitions.

This ADF project continues to foster the original spirit on which the Festival was founded: experimentation, collaboration and risk-taking. It provides a laboratory setting for these choreographers and composers out of which Hanya Holm, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and others have emerged. The three young choreographers who experimented this summer at ADF each have several years of choreographic experience to date, and are recipients of numerous awards, grants and endowments. Though their styles differ, they have one goal in common — to make it to the major leagues.

Nobody breaks through the proscenium arch more quickly and deftly than Chuck Davis. His Company comes with vibrant,



Chuck Davis dancers

African-inspired costumes, dances, songs and percussive rhythms. But Davis also brings us lessons in morality. He calls his African-American Dance Ensemble, "Edutainers." In a sense, his ADF Page Auditorium performance is a full-out culmination of his year-long mini performances throughout North Carolina public and private schools. "Mini" perhaps, but no less committed, energetic and philosophical than the July 9 performance. Davis enthusiastically and comfortably uses his art form to involve audiences in chants and hopes of "Peace, love, respect for everybody." He brings us to our feet. We respond as much to his large (well over six feet) frame, booming voice, expressive hands, and occasional manipulative invitations to join in, as we do to the exuberant dancing and music.

The Chuck Davis Dance Company and African American Dance Ensemble (an offshoot of the Company) entertained us with familiar African-rooted movements: low center of gravity, bent knees and soft foot covering large expanses of space, conveying a comfort with the earth beneath them; shimmying shoulders, sharp isolation of body parts, torsos that telegraph each beat of the wonderful musical rhythms under the direction of Kwe Yao Agypong. A beautiful departure from the fast, traveling movements is "Molu Yamee," a woman's dance. Confining their willowy movements to small spaces, they exhibit soft grace and beauty. Another special moment is the "Musical Interlude." Five-year-old Ade Love straddles a horizontal, center stage drum and beats out articulate rhythms to the accompaniment of Phillip Williamson.

The main event of the evening was the ADF commissioned piece "War of the Guardians." This narrative involving community folks is Davis' easily understood, non-abstract work dedicated to those who fight against bigotry. Hooded Klan members menace their way down the aisles to the stage. They form barriers of hate against the cross section of minorities who attempt to break through it. Then during the ensuing melee of revenge (the Klansmen now the victims), seven children rush on to

the stage yelling, "Stop!" They admonish us adults "... to unite and fight against this hatred — we will follow your positive example." The chant begins, "Peace, love, respect for everybody." The Klansmen remove their hoods and are invited to join the peace rally.

The choreography lacks sophistication. Perhaps it's Davis' desire to make his message easily accessible to everyone. The audience responded supportively. The ADF also responded to Davis, honoring his long-standing commitment to his ideals. Charles Reinhart, ADF Director, awarded him a large pendant with the inscription that reads, "Peace, Love..." but you know the rest.

"Environmental dancing," the label given to Ruby Shang's "The Small Wall Project," conjures up images of floppy footed performers self-consciously communing with nature. In fact, Shang has designed a well crafted, thoughtfully conceived travelogue through time (from ADF's half-centennial beginnings — to the present) and space (Duke's East Campus).

A particularly wonderful aspect of this one-and-a-half hour delight on July 15 was that it actively involved the audience in the 50-year history lesson. And because the event occurred outside, we reacted more freely to all the stimuli; chatting animatedly, laughing and applauding heartily.

Shang incorporated various buildings and natural arenas artfully. Practically everyone involved in the ADF got in on the act. Even Charles Reinhart and the rest of the front office crew engaged in a formal administrative Pavane. Dances on tennis courts, under the arches of the Biddle Music Building, and on the quad lawn were some of the highlights along the route to the steps of Baldwin Auditorium, the last stop.

Shang wove the young dancers (13 year-olds) in with the most experienced professionals in the ADF teaching staff. This subtle touch served to remind me of the elusive and unique process of transmitting dance and techniques from person to person through the generations.

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