

The Romance of Sticktoitiveness

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MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. At Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom (May 6 to 10). Morris's "Mythologies": *Soap-Powders and Detergents*, *Striptease*, and *Championship Wrestling*.

LUCINDA CHILDS DANCE COMPANY. At the Joyce Theater (May 12 to 17). "Dance #1" from *Dance*, *Available Light*, and *Calyx*.

LAURI NAGEL AND ELLEN WEBB. At Ethnic Folk Arts Center (May 2 to 4). Nagel's *Adagio*, *Fly*, *Snapshot*, and *Naked We Stand*; Webb's *Woman Duet*, *An American Romance*, and *Mountain/Tree*.

Nowadays, if 10 dancers face front, raise their arms overhead and shake their hands in imitation of radiant light, do you say, "dated"? No, you say, "postmodern eclecticism," or, "allusions to dance history." And if the image in question was created by Mark Morris, you add, "brilliant." As interesting as the program "Mythologies" that Morris's company presented at the Manhattan Center Ballroom is the mythology that is growing up around Morris. That he is bold enough to stage a real striptease (real only in that the dancers take it all off; there's almost more dancing in the genuine article) is said somehow to confirm his genius as a choreographer. Critics who dismiss Doris Humphrey rave about Morris's sense of form. I don't get it. Seeing Morris through the rhetoric he generates (no fault of his) is becoming harder and harder.

One thing is clear: presenting three dances based on essays by Roland Barthes—*Soap-Powders and Detergents*, *Striptease*, and *Championship Wrestling*—in a space like the Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom is brilliant showmanship. In this former masonic hall with lots of gilt and elaborate symbolic designs on the ceiling, the audience sits either in a grandstand or at round tables. There are several bars, and cabaret singer Julie Cascioppo entertains the audience before the show and during intermissions. Adopting a number of warmhearted personas, with improbable outfits to match (one involves an immense turban and a mushroom of a silk skirt), she sings sultry songs and delivers patter so subtly tacky that it reeks of intelligent planning. (She gets all smarmy with a Frenchman; she gushes over the wonderful dancers; she tells how she met Morris in their native Seattle: "He was the only one who would get up and make a human chain with me...")

So the Barthesian investigation of popular culture and what it reveals comes off the stage and confronts us head-on—all but sits on our laps—and crawls back into the past as well: what would Barthes have made of masonic balls?

What continues to intrigue me about Morris is the skill with which he can build a dance around a single idea—style or space design or sequence or relationship—much the way a pop lyricist gets a "hook" or a journalist a lead from which everything else unfolds naturally. *Championship Wrestling* is what it says it is. Wrestling. However brilliantly staged and structured it is, nothing happens but wrestling, the advance to new bouts, and the recoveries. At some point, another choreographer might mistakenly begin to think he should have his wrestlers "dance" or do something different; not Morris.

Striptease is similarly singleminded. The dancers parade out one by one along the same path, do a move, perhaps remove a garment, leave. The entrances increase in density, elements are added to the pattern, more clothes come off, but stripping is what it's all about. Stripping according to Barthes. The elaborate guises depersonalize the dancers and somehow defuse the eroticism: Rob Beserer's a smiling, gosh-ma'am cowboy, Morris a thug, Teri Weksler a bride. Toughie Susan Hadley snaps her bra in



Lucinda Childs's *Calyx*

boredom; Keith Sabado delicately unfurls a fan at his crotch. What with Phil Sandstrom's dim light and the constant motion, you almost don't notice they're naked until they pick up their clothes and walk off. And you forgot to be excited.

In *Soap-Powders and Detergents*, Morris has produced a tightly structured, bubbly piece that roams tongue-in-cheek through modern-dance-land as well as the world of white wash and difficult choices in supermarkets. While vocalists perform Herschel Garfein's witty cantata

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(intones the bass gravely, "We went to Joliet, Illinois, to see if women would give up their Era."), the dancers perform choric moves with white cloths, use them to reveal living pictures, limn a drama in which Penny Hutchinson (who won't give up her Era) is mummified in her sheets (roll over Doris Humphrey, raise your eyebrows Martha Graham). In the beginning, the company (mustn't forget Ruth Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, David Landis, Jon Mensinger, Donald Mouton, Guillermo Resto) lie for a long time waving their legs back and forth like a wash cycle with two-way rotation; later, in a front-to-back line, they create a thrilling illusion of tumble dry with a canon of wheeling arms.

Susan Sontag says Barthes would have approved.

The first of the two programs that the Lucinda Childs Dance Company presented during its Joyce Theater season might have been designed to mollify anyone who considers Childs's dances to be alike—pieces cut from a large roll of immaculate repeating patterns, differing only in what parts of the pattern the dance frames on stage.

Program A opens with "Dance #1"

from *Dance*. It's a constant, airy skeining of dancers across the stage. (A diagonal can be considered a major event). Emptiness is a part of it, and the rate at which dancers disappear, reappear, and travel together. After a while, you can predict when someone will enter leaping, hopping, making swift little changes of direction within the phrase, because these entrances are keyed to Philip Glass's rhythmic patterns; but you can't always predict how many will enter or with which of several variant sequences.

On the other hand, *Available Light* (in a scaled-down version without Frank Gehry's split-level set) is studded with pauses, and most of the 10 dancers seem to be on stage most of the time. So it seems both calmer and denser than the excerpt from *Dance*.

Calyx, unlike the other two dances, has a set—an elaborate structure by Tadashi Kawamata that appears to be made of dark metal. It hangs low in the center of the stage with a pattern of more or less horizontal struts surrounding a central part that does resemble a calyx, but also a hovering spacecraft. Beverly Emmons's lighting heightens its weight and drama. To music by Harry de Wit that seems far more complex rhythmically than the scores Childs usually works with, the dancers make patterns that expand and tighten as if in reference to the sculpture. There are bold leaps in this dance, but a sense too, of churning in place. The last section begins and ends with an almost informal crisscrossing walk by the company (Childs did not perform). The dance has a vague, slightly ominous, sci-fi atmosphere, and I'm sure no one is surprised when, at the very end, the calyx slowly descends to touch the floor.

As always, the purity of Childs's work can be both exhilarating and chilling. The dancers—dressed alike, their gender downplayed, never touching—can look beyond-human. Then you'll start to notice, say, Raissa Lerner's ebullience or

Christine Phillion's naturalness, Jorge Collazo's power, Garry Reigenborn's tireless clarity. Suddenly you'll see that Emily Stern—wonderfully elegant and cool—is actually beginning to sweat, or be struck by the vividness of Michael Ing's dynamics. On the one hand, the people in Childs's world are so immaculate, so detached that they seem like a different race; when a new dancer appears on stage, you can almost imagine that one offstage has split and produced an offspring. Yet it's sheer human intelligence and devotion and skill that creates this image, and the duality has a lot to do with the interest that Childs's work provokes.

Movement Research paired Lauri Nagel and Ellen Webb (who's now based in San Francisco) on its Presenting Series. The combination was effective, because they are very dissimilar but they have in common succinctness and single-mindedness.

Webb's *Mountain/Tree* is brief enough to be a haiku, but it doesn't have a haiku's wry explosion of meaning at the end. Webb's husband, artist Sandy Walker, paints the line of a mountain range on the backdrop behind her, while she quietly arranges her body into peaks and slopes; when he slowly carries a large already-painted tree, she tosses her arms, sways her hips. As dance, it's almost invisible, but, on reflection, nice.

Nagel's film *Fly* has a similar poetic straightforwardness, although it makes a comment. A woman lies, belly-down on a box on a city rooftop, straining her body upward, stretching her arms like wings. At times, the camerawork (slightly clumsy; this is Nagel's first film) presents the figure against the sky, as if she's convinced herself into the air; at other times, she's clearly pinned to the roof and tiring fast.

Webb's most powerful and sensual dance is a duet for herself and Patricia Mason, performed in silence. After a brief moment when they slowly circle each other, like animals figuring out how to attack, they are rarely separated. You wonder what they're trying to do: one minute one is holding the other up, then someone is being pushed down. Are they leaning on each other or trying to knock one another over? Images of sisterly competition, lovemaking, animals nuzzling, appear and dissolve. Mostly, they seem to be wanting to stay attached to each other in whatever way they can.

An American Romance is more diffuse, not nearly as engrossing. Webb, Mason, and Lynn Macri dance to part of the soundtrack from the film *A Place in the Sun*. Each is in a private dreamworld, subtly echoing words and sentences that we hear. Perhaps the problem is that their gentle and fragmentary image-making pales when juxtaposed to the voices of Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift and the suspense of narrative.

Webb, fair-haired, clear-eyed, has always retained something of the frank, yet dreamy child in her performing. Nagel is childlike in size, but she has a very strong body, and her attack is as bold as her witty, alert face. In *Adagio*, Evan Alboum plays a Satie *Gymnopedie* on the piano, while Nagel attempts a ballet recital number, but with feet and arms encased in large detergent boxes. She plays it straight, and it's very funny. I liked her improvisation too—particularly the way she scuttles up to a light and sniffs it. In *Naked We Stand*, she skillfully manipulates the naked mannequin of a small boy, so that it appears to be a live dancing partner. Again her performing is so clear and unaffected that the comedy and the sadness emerge without comment or emphasis. And emerge with force.

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