

Post-Everything Classicism

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

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VOICE JUNE 14, 1988

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. *New Love Song Waltzes, Fugue and Fantasy, Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, One Charming Night, and Strict Songs.* At Brooklyn Academy of Music, May 17 through 22.

AMERICAN BALLET THEATER. Mark Morris's *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes.* At the Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center, 362-6000, April 20 through June 11.

ARMITAGE BALLET. Karole Armitage's *Duck Dance, Crucifixus, Oh My God; The Last Gone Dance; and Kammerdisco.* At the Joyce Theater, May 24 through June 5.

I'm reminded of Mark Morris when I look at paintings associated with the "new classicism," especially those by Milet Andrejevic: Arcadia in Central Park, where the noble, brooding figure sitting by the lake is a gray-haired jogger with a towel, where "Apollo" is a long-haired kid with an acoustic guitar, and Daphne one of three high school nymphs in shorts or rolled-up pants; where Acteon, walking his dogs, stares at Diana retying her scarf, and a Frisbee floats in the background.

Morris's dancers also strike me as contemporary deities in the garden of classicism. Their clothes are modern, even commonplace; although they are splendid dancers, their bodies haven't the high definition of today's superdancers; their movements are blunt and sturdy. And I think it's the tension between their homespun behavior and the inherent grandeur and purity of Morris's highly musical constructions that give the dances power.

The vampire and his victim/lover in *One Charming Night* enact their drama of lust and intoxication in the personas of what might be a small-town suitor and his *prim* girlfriend, or a flamboyant minister and his convert. And all to ravishing Purcell songs (gorgeously sung at these performances by countertenor Drew Minter). A canonic flurry of wheeling arms and turning bodies in *New Love Song Waltzes* (Brahms's *Neue Liebeslieder Walzer, op. 65*—also performed wonderfully) mixes its limp, timeless formalism with the imagery of Fourth of July pinwheels and Radio City Ballet down-the-line gestures. It's not just the last image in *Strict Songs*—people floating in air, balanced on a partner's up-raised feet—that creates the illusion of an Arcadia inhabited by beach athletes, it's the salty, tender air of the dance, the snuggling on the ground, the blithe rushes across the stage (almost a polonaise step), Tina Fehlandt's floor solo, with its pincering legs.

The mix of contemporary vernacular imagery with classical forms, music, and themes is even more obvious in *Fugue and Fantasy*—set to Mozart's *Fugue in C minor, K. 401* and *Fantasia in C minor for Piano, K. 475* (the excellent pianist was David Oei). Four dancers sit on chairs to execute a rigorous fugue. But the fugue is composed of small, often odd pedestrian gestures—crossing a leg, clapping a hand to one's face, standing; the repetitions, overlaps, cleverly built-in moments of contact, and the gradual rise in temperature give it the look of a lesson on the fugue designed for a crowded bus depot. The "fantasy" is a long, troubled odyssey on a diagonal. It takes five dancers (Ruth Davidson, Susan Hadley, Jon Mensinger, Donald Mouton, and Keith Sabado) the entire piece of music to cross the stage because of the intricate maneuvers within their tight cluster: the falling back, the pushing aside, the pulling out of harm's way, the catches and heart-stopping misses—all of which repeat and repeat. It's like seeing a family, lost on a minor hike, suddenly broach the River Styx.

Of all the dances, *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (Poulenc), seemed the most



LaNasa and Catanache in Karole Armitage's *Duck Dance*

LOIS GREENFIELD

indistinct, the blend of the abstract and the mundane less sure. And the costumes are distracting: the black tops and red tights (yellow for Morris) make everyone look bottom-heavy. Still, it too is full of illuminating ideas: Morris rushing between two diagonal lines of dancers, the catalyst caught in his creation—a part of it, yet separate, even pushed away by another dancer in a reprise of a motif he created earlier for others.

A certain tightness, an almost doctrinaire approach to structure sometimes grips Morris's dances (as in the Mozart, although I didn't mind it in this). But his *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*, for American Ballet Theater, has nothing of this tightness. It's gorgeous—easily the richest, most fluent work he's made. In this case, his Arcadia is the ballet world, but with all the studio windows open, a stiff wind blowing through, and all the dancers just a tiny bit high.

The music—a superb and audacious choice—is Virgil Thomson's *Etudes for Piano*, and Morris begins audaciously:

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the very fine pianist, Michael Boriskin, all alone at the back of the stage, in a beam of light, plays the thorny "Chromatic Double Harmonies," and no dancer appears until the very end, when a man carries a woman across above his head like a branch.

A rather tight little motif is introduced. A dancer jumps high, with legs bent into a diamond, and lands with arms wreathed overhead "en couronne;" as a second echoes the step, landing behind him/her, the dancer in front drops into a wide-legged position, arms out to the side—low and stiff. Fortunately, although this move recurs, Morris doesn't insist on it, and its components become a basis for easy-going variations. (The whole ballet, in fact, is modest about its dazzling construction.) From then on, the first half of the ballet is a flurry of activity: a cluster of breezy simultaneous actions; several

brief, quite proper, unison pas de deux; people spinning past in huge *sauts de Basque*; a man (it is Baryshnikov) helping another (Julio Bocca) up and pulling him offstage; solemn classroom extensions of the leg; a sudden series of precise explosions made simply out of people leaning sharply to the side, arms slanting; a quartet that's all soft sweeping arms and bodies bending deeply to the side.

In this, Morris plays only a little with gender—Susan Jaffe promenades Carl Jonassaint; Baryshnikov is held aloft by another man—but he does emphasize equality among his 12 first-class dancers, and a communality of the elite. The comings and goings are blithe, but rapid and strenuous. In their trim, handsome outfits by Santo Loquasto, in lighting (by Phil Sandstrom) that subtly alters from fresh morning to sunset glow in no particular sequence, the dancers look Olympian.

As Thomson's piano pieces progress, they seem to open out, to be more recognizable plays on style. Morris begins to devote entire short pieces to a few dancers. Baryshnikov begins a sort of tango à la Russe with a volley of his best pirouettes; when Robert Hill enters to take over the bold and complex dance, Baryshnikov moves to an equally interesting contrapuntal subject; Bocca's entrance further shifts the beguiling material around. Van Hamel begins what sounds like a cakewalk with imperturbable *échappés* and *passés* à la *Raymonda*. To driftier music, Jaffe and Bocca sprint elaborately past each other time after time, never connecting. And the last piece is the simplest and fullest of all: the melody "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes" gradually being filtered from its musical surround, the dancing becoming firmer and tenderer and then slipping away, leaving one person lying on stage, another crouched—like antique statues marooned by time.

Karole Armitage's "new classicism" is very different from Morris's: her vocabulary tends to be Balanchine-style modern classicism deranged, her images of dancers stereotypical, and her ballets chic and violent. Abrasive

contemporary images alternate with allusions to, or quotes from, the past.

Armitage's profile as a ballet choreographer seems gradually to be emerging from the jumpy blend of Balanchine, Cunningham, postmodernism, and punk that she's been stirring for the past few years. The style, dances, and dancers are stronger, the decor and costumes by painter David Salle slightly less overwhelming, the phrases ever witty in construction and lively to look at. But I often get an impression of random sensationalism, and I still find her retro views unappealing and puzzling. In the first part of *Duck Dance, Crucifixus, Oh My God* (a clever, hair-raising arrangement by Jeffrey Lohn of a "crucifixus" by J.S. Bach—as with Armitage, it doesn't do to ask *why*), the dancers work in couples a great deal, the men vigorously manipulating the women into uncomfortable positions, the women submitting, but taking on the men's aggressiveness. The bent-wristed gestures, jutting hips, sly turn-in-turn-out of long, elegant legs, the jabbing pointework, the sexy concentration on the audience are not only Balanchine exaggerated, they remind me of the stylish, *démodé* cocottes of Roland Petit's ballets of the 1950s.

At the end of the first part, Armitage enters for the first time, dressed in gray leotards with big spots like everyone else, pretends to shoot herself, and falls dead. The second section then proceeds like the disrobing/mating dance in Balanchine's *Bugaku*, except that Katherine LaNasa and Daniel Catanach are ceremoniously robed in lavish kimonos, and then proceed to do a duet from the first section, but with passionate irritation. The heavy clothes constrict the movement and help to turn the duet into a fight; a tough/coy shoulder shake becomes a shudder of rage. I enjoyed the formal device very much, but its *raison d'être* was obscure.

The Last Gone Dance is a quite brilliant, moody, fragmented apache dance (performed by Armitage and Michael Pu-

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Dangerous Birds

BY BURT SUPREE

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES. Conceived and directed by Molly Davies, choreographed by Suzushi Hanayagi, music by Takehisa Kosugi, film by Davies and Richard Connors, text by Charles Mee, set and light design by Stefan Mayer. At La Mama Annex, May 5 through 29.

WENDY PERRON DANCE COMPANY. *Divertissement, Down Like Rain, Don't Tell Us, and Arena.* At the Joyce Theater, May 18.

Black-and-white film of a train, tracks, an industrial city (New York), spills across a gaping curtain of slashed vertical panels, while Takehisa Kosugi plays fierce, haunting music on an amplified fiddle. God, he's good. Brian Moran moves aside some of the panels. Suzushi Hanayagi, wearing an oversize black coat and sunglasses, brings forward two huge white balloons, anchors them one at a time: she plays out the string of the first until, high in midair, the balloon catches the image of a tree on its lunar surface.

Conceived and directed by Molly Davies, who, with Richard Connors, was responsible for the film segments (requiring three projectionists), and choreographed by Hanayagi, *Arrivals and Departures* is

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