

Private Dancer

By Elizabeth Zimmer

Molissa Fenley

At the Kitchen
October 6 through 17

Alone on stage, Molissa Fenley is commanding. More than many choreographers, she harnesses the mobility of the upper body, driving her arms through space with shapely intensity. In a sense there are two of her: the taut, dynamic creature above the waist, and the calm, gentle one circling her legs below. Her energy never flags; for half an hour, in last year's *Place*, she carves arcs into the darkness; we watch, astonished.

In *The Floor Dances (Requiem for the Living)* she doesn't even stand up. Lying or sitting in a circle of stones that match exactly her gray tank top, tights, and socks, occasionally struggling to her knees, she might be a hobbled bird, eager to fly though prevented by circumstance (the 1989 piece remembers wildlife devastated in the Alaskan oil spill). But she's never more nor less than a wide-eyed woman, intent on finding new paths through space.

What is it, then, that goes wrong in the two new works? I have a couple of theories. Perhaps she's the kind of artist whose dances, like good soups or stews, improve with time, developing their full robustness after every inflection has seeped into her bones. And perhaps she is essentially a solo dancer, less at ease in the company of others, a bit at sea even with the four life-size mold-

ed figures (a gold one suspended in air, two angled off the floor on racks, and one standing downstage) that populate her new *Witches' Float*.

For *Witches' Float* she's naked above the waist, her skin stained a terra cotta color above floaty white trousers, a contemporary temple dancer with mute, immobile acolytes. Alvin Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire* oscillates in the Kitchen's huge cube of space. Fenley looks ill at ease, drifting among the figures, reaching out to them with her elbows and her hands. At one point she self-consciously enters the "personal space" of the standing figure, purses her lips, then backs off with tiny steps and takes wide lunges away, more comfortable in more open territory.

In the evening's premiere, *Tilliboyo/Escalay*, Fenley first dances alone to what sounds like a thumb piano (the music is African, and Fenley, raised in Nigeria, seems perfectly at home with it); later, the wonderful score melds African sounds with the artistry of the Kronos Quartet. Fenley wears a form-fitting brown top and a white wrap skirt, bounding through David Moody's tropical light. She is joined for the second part of the work by Christopher Mattox, a ballet dancer dressed just like her (he could be her brother; his blond hair's a bit longer than her crew cut). Trouble is, he's less at ease with her movement than she is, and though they share the space they barely acknowledge each other; their hands

brush for a moment just before the end.

Another theory is that four of these pieces is too many for one program; for a soloist to hold our full attention for more than two hours is a lot to ask. Because Fenley chose to run opening night of her retrospective season in roughly chronological order, my rods and cones may just have been too tired to see the new pieces with the clear focus she brought to her performance. ■

JOWITT

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

audiences do to Laura Dean's rhythmic-geometric ordeals, as if building up sympathetic endorphins just by watching the arduous patterns.

Making of Maps tackles tradition more daringly. The score by Alistair MacDonald and R. A. Ramamani collages children's voices, traffic noises, a guru chanting, and traditional music (which sometimes wins out). Initially, the sound jolts off and on again. The dancing is full of sudden stops too, of motion pitted against stillness. Against a background design (by Andrea Blotkamp) that looks like irregular black piano keys, the women (all five) may begin a rapid phrase only to have it vanish under them and leave them motionless. In this dance, the women not only roll on the floor, they pull one another by the hand. But the innovations never seem inappropriate. And, despite the fact that several false endings make the piece feel long, it's almost constantly intriguing.

In *Solo 1*, one of those hour-plus solos that are de rigueur in Europe

AGNES DE MILLE, 1905-1993

Her father hoped she'd be a playwright like him. She became a different kind of storyteller. Friend to modern dancers like Martha Graham, an upstart to many in the ballet world she fought to enter, Agnes de Mille was one of several choreographers who, in the 1940s, brought an American sensibility to ballet, devising tales that limned grit, bumptiousness, and love of open spaces, as well as New England tightness. She said once, disarmingly, that she didn't consider herself a "real choreographer," that she didn't think in terms of original movement. She prided herself on making steps, gestures, and groupings reveal mood, character, locale. In *Fall River Legend* the way Lizzie Borden handles the family ax, in *Rodeo* the way the tomboy heroine sidles among the ranch hands she yearns to be one of and slings a leg over her horse of air tell us as much as any playwright could in words. And in the musicals she choreographed—by her count 18, including *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and *Brigadoon*—she used serious dancers seriously and made their dancing reveal layers within the plot.

She was a fighter—fought to become a dancer after a late start; wrangled with the Broadway establishment; tartly and elegantly lectured senators and congressmen in defense of the National Endowment for the Arts; battled her way back to creative vigor after a cerebral hemorrhage in 1975 nearly killed her. The struggle became, in her many finely written books, scenes in an engrossing play. Beginning with *Dance to the Piper*, she turned the life of a dancer into great yarns that crackled with dance rhythms. Red-knuckled British dancers with tights that never fully dried, Russian ballet dancers eyeing her cowboy gallop with bafflement—she brought them vividly to life. Her hymns to sweat, shin splints, and dogged professionalism have never been bettered. Reading them, young dancers shudder and can't wait to enter the field.—D.J.

and Canada, Dutch dancer-choreographer Annamiri van der Pluijm charts her life in dance. Wearing a black slip and changing shoes when necessary, she travels toward us and away from us on a chalk-smear path maybe 10 feet wide at the front, narrower at the back. Van der Pluijm—tall, leggy, severe—creates meticulous repetitive sequences out of a few strong moves. One part clearly recalls her stint as a model, another her tango lessons. Those looking to crack the code may also find distilled echoes

of Kei Takei and Reinhild Hoffmann. At the end, she recaps seconds from each section as if trying to make sense of them or integrate them in her body.

Some of the segments are fascinating, especially an austere gesture sequence that van der Pluijm performs sitting on a bench. But I find her well-schooled elegance chilly and unyielding. Even in a supposedly gleeful hoedown, she looks as if she can only bend so far and that a full release of tension would destroy her. ■