

Laura Dean Dancers & Musicians Joyce Theater

In the past I have not always been a fan of Laura Dean's choreography, although I admire her insistence on serving as both choreographer and composer, producing live music to accompany live dancing. But I had never seen any of her work from the mid-70's, when she first gained her reputation as an exciting new experimentalist. So when the company presented a twenty-fifth-anniversary retrospective season at the Joyce this spring I took the opportunity to see what I had missed.

And to my astonishment, I loved the old dances, which were charged with a fire and energy that I had never seen from Dean. Her trademark spinning motions, now grown, if not sedate, at least moderate, were here juiced up to tornado intensity. How can a person possibly do this without getting dizzy? If I tried this I would collapse into a feebly retching and twitching heap. But they keep doing it, and it is exciting to see. But the appeal of these pieces is not just for the medical journals; the dance as a whole is engaging and exciting. It is a tribute to Dean and her company that they have been able to recapture such an art-on-the-edge excitement in such old pieces.

I am referring here to a piece called *Dance*, from 1976, the year after the company was founded, and to a long excerpt from *Spiral*, of 1977. At the beginning of *Dance* the dancers stand still and vocalize; then they start to run in huge circles around the stage—I was reminded a little of some of Lucinda Childs' work of the time. But the patterns keep breaking up, getting more complex, finally more anarchic-looking. The musicians are playing what seem to be electric zithers. Periodically a dancer will start to spin—really spin—and travel across the stage like a planet traveling through the fixed stars. This music and dancing of the spheres is downright hypnotic.

The excerpt from *Spiral* of 1977 on the same program was also most attractive. Here each of the dancers does a solo while the rest, standing in a sort of chorus line, perform ritualistic gestures. There is again that violent, almost inhuman spinning. Among the dancers, Dana Fillingner was a particular standout.

Unfortunately, the other pieces on the three programs did not sustain this high level. Even *Tympania*, a piece which employed what look like gestures borrowed from Chinese Tai Chi exercises, seemed dull in comparison with these earlier works. Already the spinning had slowed down to a "normal human rate." *Equator* (from 1988) had its moments: it is a hot, tropical number (with bright red costumes) that put me in mind of something a beach resort might lay on to divert the guests. The two New York premieres, *Inner Circle* and *Shaman II*, from 1983 and 1987 respectively, were interesting and pleasant, though not revelatory. *Inner Circle* exploited symmetry and ceremonialism; *Shaman II*, apparently a reworking of an earlier piece, featured endless permutations. But where is the visceral excitement of the early days?

Robert Whitman Black Dirt The Kitchen

Back in the 1960's Robert Whitman was known for staging Happenings, and he has kept on doing so, into a time when his activities are known as performance art. And a strange and wonderful art it is, although this show, at any rate, was more art—movable art to be sure—than performance. In contrast to most performance today, which usually centers on the human performer to the point of encouraging outright hamminess, in this show the human actors are just one more element in a larger picture.

As we enter the space we see that the stage, seats and risers have disappeared, to be replaced with a huge tent. There are some trees hanging about halfway up, a pile of sand, a long strip of painted material that suggests a river. A projection of an onion is traveling leisurely about the room. At various times we see people conversing in an incomprehensible language, out beyond the tent. The sand pile starts to heave and gives birth to two garbage bags that prove to contain people; they wrap up sand, bags and all and which everything up toward the ceiling, where it hangs like a garbage bag of Damocles through the rest of the performance. A glowing bump moves down the river, and a pile of black cloth in the corner sprouts arms or wings and starts to move—it's scary, it looks like the Devil, until the performers take refuge behind it. Hooks descend from the ceiling, pull up the floorcloth, and we see more projections. There is no black dirt in evidence.

Nothing in this show makes any sort of linear sense, but it is strangely compelling. The logic of this piece is again the logic of dreams, and the effect is that same eerie sense of disequilibrium that we find there.

KSEC ACT '90 The Strange Rider III Festival I.A.T.I. at Cuando

Japanese *buto* meets flamenco *gitano* to illuminate Michel de Ghelderode's play *The Strange Rider*. It seemed a fairly strange notion, but for some reason the Japanese are crazy about flamenco, and in fact the two forms have been merged before. Presumably the flamenco element accounts for this production's appearance in the I.A.T.I. festival, organized by the Instituto Arte Teatral Internacional, which focuses on local Spanish-language theaters which might otherwise find it impossible to get produced. KSEC ACT '90 is a Japanese Theater company founded in 1980 (was it called ACT '80 then?), focusing on twentieth-century Western plays: Beckett, Garcia Lorca, Arrabal, Ghelderode, fusing Spanish avant-garde esthetics and Japanese corporeal expressions.

The play concerns a group of old people who are told Death is about to arrive. They panic, imagining various images of Death; but in the end, Death takes not one of them but a newborn baby instead. The director, Kei Jingui, has mounted a production that emphasizes dance and other forms of nonverbal performance, although there are periods of recitation in Japanese. Usually I had at least a vague idea of what was being represented, although I often felt very much on the outside of what was going on, not sure I was getting the point but interested nonetheless.

There were six people in ragged robes with tin bowls, in whiteface, *buto* style, who run on in a panic and behave most eccentrically. As they made faces at the audience, it was a temptation to make faces back at them. Three figures of Death appear: a woman in what looks like an ornate kimono, but may be an angel suit with wings; a flamenco dancer in a black lace dress; and a figure in a red dress and a crown of wilted flowers, looking like a decayed version of the goddess Flora. A heavily produced Japanese pop song seems to have a familiar tune—eventually I figured out it's "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." After this one of the old ones hands out toilet bowls to his comrades, and everyone dances; later Japanese chanting and *Carmen* make their appearance.

I was puzzled by much that went on in this show, and I could not understand the Japanese dialogue. But I was impressed by the spirit of extremism, of wildness and experiment, which has been drained from so much of our supposedly experimental theater. I hope to see more of it, both imported and home-grown.

Other Dances

David Parsons, for many years a much-admired dancer in Paul Taylor's company, brought his *Parsons Dance Company* to the Joyce for a week's run, triumphing over an injury that had threatened to cancel the season. I have always admired Parsons as a dancer, but his choreography has seemed somewhat lightweight. Happily it appears to have deepened somewhat. I was particularly taken with *Scrutiny*, a dance (from 1987) that apparently concerns the increased scrutiny Parsons' work began to receive when he started his own company. Another piece of interest was *Incandescence*, decorated with old-fashioned light bulbs hanging on wires, to a score by Leslie Stuck featuring drums and jungle growls; the dancing here has some nice hard edges. In *Nascimento*, to the music of the Brazilian singer of that name, there was some very fine dancing by Gail Gilbert. And there was the famous *Caught*, a gimmick but a good one: strobelighting makes it seem that Parsons can fly.

Also at the Joyce, *ISO Dance Theatre*, which is to say Daniel Ezralow, James Hampton, Ashley Roalind and Morleigh Steinberg, put on a week's performances. ISO is a spinoff from *Momix*, itself a spinoff from *Pilobolus*, and their work is somewhat reminiscent of *Pilobolus* in style. Their opening-night performance was a joint program with *The Bobs*, a California a cappella singing group whose songs are often amusingly mordant and who have performed often with ISO. In *Pilobolus* style, the choreography is often credited to everyone who dances in the piece. The work is often quite snappy, in a light, popular vein, something one might expect to see in a hip nightclub.

An unusual but interesting program at the Parsons School of Design's May Theater, *Kumu Hula*, dealt with the wide variety of traditional Hawaiian dance that is covered by the term "hula," as well as its watered-down Americanized variant that is now better known. A film by Robert Mudge showed us many of Hawaii's leading traditional troupes *in situ*; a small company of dancers then demonstrated both old and new styles. It was a revelation to see how much more interesting the traditional dances are than the modern, compromised style that most people have long dismissed as tourist fodder.

A group from Chicago called *Goat Island*, led by Lin Hixson, presented *We Got a Date* at the 14th St. Dancecenter (the 14th St. Y, that is). The seats were set up in two rows facing each other, with a fairly narrow

corridor in between. The performers proceed at various rates along this corridor, or sit at tables at either end; occasionally they run around the outside of this arrangement. The movement is highly athletic, even jocklike, and seemed right at home in the gym at the Y. Eventually the performers start to interrogate one another: one is Roy Cohn, another is Joseph Welch, famous figures from the McCarthy hearings of the 1950's; there are questions concerning various childhood sexual experiences. It was a harsh and violent piece, and a rather interesting one.

The *Living Theatre* put on a piece called *The Body of God*, featuring a number of homeless people, about the housing crisis; the play was over when some of the actors had to get back to the shelter. The result seemed more like the old *Living Theatre* events of the '60s than like most of what the group has done since. Much of the material is quite moving, and there was no feeling that anyone was being exploited for shock value—although other forms of exploitation were very much on the *Living's* mind, and properly so.

A showings called *Dance Cluster* at the Cunningham Studio included some interesting work. Marilyn Dantz's *Phantom Pain* featured Anne Walsemann interacting with four large, grotesque masks on stilts. Nancy Stern Bain showed a cherry romp about Wall Street. *Street Games*; it was fun but one had to wonder, can one really look at these people as cheerful rompers without thinking of the effects of their activities? Rick Guilmont's *Oh! Solo Mio... Trio* was also rather nice in a show-biz sort of way.

Nancy Zadora's program at Dia Art Foundation started out with solos and got more crowded; I liked the solos best. The opening solo, *Eeyah!!!*, included a chorus of Thai pig calls; Zadora would sometimes dance, sometimes sit, to the pig calls (recorded by Bill and Mary Buchen) and Brenda Hutchinson's music; the piece had a spooky sort of power. There was also a piece on the program called *Inscriptions for a Cylinder Seal*; but aside from a few Ancient Near Eastern-looking gestures, it didn't look that Mesopotamian to me.

Kristen Miller-Caputo is a young choreographer who put on her "first real concert" at Middle Collegiate Church recently. And it was a pretty good start at that: there was nothing boring, dumb or mechanically pretty about her dances, which tend to combine energetic movement with text, or at least a social situation; they have a bright, perky (but not too cheery) character that is quite attractive.



David Parsons takes to the air.
Photo: Lois Greenfield