

# THE KITCHEN

VIDEO  
MUSIC  
PERFORMANCE  
DANCE



Michael Duffy in Chong's *Rainier and the Knife*

## It's Not the Size that Matters

By Deborah Jowitz

**DIANE FRANK AND DEBORAH RILEY.** At Cunningham studio (December 8 and 10). *Room* (Second Site).

**RAINER AND THE KNIFE.** At the Kitchen (December 15 to 19). A collaboration by Ping Chong and Rob List.

**SPOKE THE HUB DANCING.** At the Living Room, Brooklyn (December 16 to 18). Elise Long's *Fogdog Scratch His HIB/O or Anatomy of a Miscarriage*.

Twenty-five years ago, dance concerts—and I use the term recklessly—like the ones I'm writing about this week simply couldn't have happened. Choreographers had few and costly opportunities to show their work, and they had to show everything they knew how to do at one shot. But now, choreographers think nothing of making a single work that interests them, and that they assume would interest others, and putting it on. Maybe it lasts an hour, maybe less. When Diane Frank and Deborah Riley's *Room* (Second Site) ended, the audience sat there in the Cunningham studio for several minutes, not entirely believing that this was all.

It was all, though, and it was quite a lot: a big rangy spread of dancing by nine performers (the two women themselves, Frank Faust, Karen Fink, Ann Sorvino, John Stowe, Pier Voulkos, Bill Young, and Lonna Wilkerson). I was especially impressed by the men, some of whom I can't remember ever having seen before. These performers come and go, occasionally all inhabiting the big, warm, clean space at the same time. Bit by bit, one by one, they shed sweaters and pants and assorted outer garments until they're down to basic practice clothes. At one point it becomes clear that shortly after one last woman gets her sweater off, the dance will end.

*Room* reminded me a little of Douglas Dunn's *Loxy Midge*, in which both Frank and Riley performed. *Loxy Midge* was an assemblage of previously choreographed movement modules put together in performance by the dancers, according to whim. *Room*, I believe, was choreographed, but it gives a similar impression: that of a community of intelligent, vital, unpretentious people engaging in a great deal of diverse activity. Often you see the

dancers islanded—two moving together here, one over there, four at the back; then some of them rush across the intervening spaces to alter the composition of a group and commence some new and intricate labor. This patterning may be a natural outgrowth of the collaborative process—a duet Frank choreographed juxtaposed against a trio of Riley's, say—but it creates the impression of a society in which anyone can become a leader, an instigator, and peaceably induce small ruffles of wind or new currents in the dancing. Occasionally, everyone unites, as when couples feed into a diagonal (dance class style), with the first couple, and then the next and the next separating and looping to the back again.

The dancing itself—sometimes extremely beautiful and odd—is mostly quick, agile with a lot of tricky stepping and high flashing leg gestures. But the dancers move their bodies and arms vigorously too—twisting, collapsing, flailing. One of the most intriguing stylistic properties is a dynamic one: often a gesture, begun with an easy sweep, will build into a punch or slash. This quality and the ways in which the dancers sink into certain steps or fall into each other's arms or clumsily and tenderly help one another along give an emotional heat to the dancing, despite the serenity of the performers. This heat is considerably boosted by an electronic score by John Driscoll and Linda Fisher titled "All lines are busy." As the dancers rush into more and more new entanglements, maintaining their composure and their purposefulness, the music throbs hugely, working its way to the kind of climax Frank and Riley are not, I think, prepared to seek in dancing, but are willing to imply.

Riley and Frank, like many of their peers, value awkwardness. Sleek as they are, they seem to like a rough edge to things, a brackness that is more human than dancery—leaving, as it does, little time to etch a gesture in marble. Ping Chong, a very different sort of artist, sets off even the occasional awkward gesture with a precision that separates it from everything around it, makes you see it so clearly that you can't forget it.

Chong's latest work, a collaboration

with Rob List, is called *Rainier and the Knife*. Like everything of his that I've seen—both his own pieces and those made jointly with Meredith Monk—*Rainier and the Knife* is an assemblage of cryptic events, words, motions that gleam with an almost sinister clarity. Compared with what I consider his most beautiful work, *Humboldt's Current*, *Rainier and the Knife* seems unreasonant—a brilliant exercise in style applied to an oddly trivial "plot," or, at least, to a plot that doesn't open quite enough cracks in your brain.

The story that List and Chong detail in the program is a fable about a boy whose mother gives him a knife and three tips: 1. Never take a knife that is red; 2. Never take a knife from another man; 3. Never lose the knife. *Rainier*, who is a sort easily duped, messes up on all three of these and is executed for a murder he didn't commit. So?

The real mystery, of course, is why this woman gives a knife to what seems to be practically an infant.

The scenes unfold with a macabre slowness and almost mechanical precision. *Rainier's* mother, a cold and elegant woman in a black dress sitting on a bench, instructing her squatting little son (played by a grown man) in German about knives, first makes him copy certain gestures—a circling of a hand in the air, a rather unpleasant zig-zag slashing—which in retrospect seems like a lesson in gut-ripping. But she sits so straight and contained on her bench, never moving except to utter her few words or gestures, that you feel you're seeing a scrap of old film with frames missing here and there.

The most striking scene is a stilted "ballet" by the Mayor and those connected with him—secretaries, cooks, mistresses, etc., many women of all ages, dressed in black. Backs to the audience, they side-step around each other, and then go into a very snaky pass-the-knife dance. We—and poor *Rainier* who's hunting for his blade—barely see it flash from hand to hand to pocket, while a surly man in army fatigues (Michael Duffy) identifies the people for us, snarling at us to pay attention. The 10 of them look almost like mechanical dolls as they pair up to foxtrot or advance toward us in twos for furtive exchanges built around gestures of horror

## DANCE

or surprise. Some of the music by Public Image Ltd., the Young Marble Giants, Comedian Harmonistes and Erik Neumann (who plays *Rainier*) supports images of a banal hotel ballroom, of a mechanical cabaret act about conspiracy.

It's a servant girl (Trinket Monsod) who stabs the Mayor with *Rainier's* knife. Here too, the action has the pace and design of an animated waxwork display. The Mayor (Steve Clorfeine) stands stiffly on a platform while the woman robes him. When she has to deal with his ceremonial sash or helmet (!), he bends slowly forward from the hips until his head and neck are within her reach, she jams on the item, and he straightens up. When he's all dressed, she pulls him off the platform by the head, and they both come alive—dodging and crouching. You can see why she hates him; he's powerful, crafty, but fundamentally stupid. She gets him. And gives the knife back to dumb *Rainier*.

The execution is similarly acid. *Rainier* is wrapped in clothes. As he stands there like a mummy, lights flash around his body. He falls, a rope is attached to him, and he is slowly pulled away—his own funeral barge.

Had I taken notes for Elise Long's *Fogdog Scratch His HIB/O or Anatomy of a Miscarriage*, they would have gone like this: Ten minutes late—first time ever. 9th Street and 7th Avenue in Brooklyn. Why'd I ever...? Wrong door: must be a disco. Okay, right place now. A big beautiful studio with a balcony all the way around, absolutely crammed with newspapers, pleated papers, clothes, furniture, scraps of paper with writing on them. All over the floor, hanging from the walls, concealing the rear part of the studio.

In the front, sofas, chairs, tables, beer, popcorn, real people watching TV or reading, papier maché people beside the TV. In front, the ellipsis of *Fogdog*—a lumpy costume w/boots and papier maché snout. Well. Grab a place on the couch. The screen is showing high points from a live performance of *Fogdog*. Here's Long as embarrassed talk-show hostess discussing the possibility of revival. No dice. Nice footage of kids playing with *Fogdog* while the English voice of woman playing *Fogdog* talks about getting into doghouses.

A lot of the few people on the couches are in the video—on leashes, falling, getting together to learn a song. Meanwhile, Long, looking unkempt, hustles into the rear part of the studio and begins to dance. She's joined by the Englishwoman. They dance big, friendly, bold, ram-bunctious, loose-jointed, sloppy stuff. Talking as they go. How do I see it? I see through a six-inch gap in the hanging paper.

Time for a beer and yet another mouthful of popcorn. Long starts hunting madly through cassettes. Puts one on, lets it play a while, takes it off. Tries another. Is this planned? Has she really lost the right tape in the mess? I think her carelessness has structure, but can't be sure. Read the newspaper. One tape shows some of the movement we almost saw a minute ago. Most of the audience disappears to the back where they rehearse a hymn, getting slightly better each time. There are candles back there. Long says it's over and do we want some cider?

Peruse her pinned-up notes: one item on a list of things to do says "going to library to look up death, humor, experience...." "Truth" is added in red. Figure this whole evening was a wake for a piece Long made over a year ago, called *Fogdog*; the critics didn't much like it. Well, why not have a wake? But why invite strangers?

All-one-thing events like these engender a particular mode of seeing. You can't make comparisons between works; the dancers hang onto their personas. I find my critical apparatus almost dormant until I rise and stretch/walk home/talk with a friend/pray the F train comes.