

# DanceBeat

Deborah Jowitt on bodies in motion

January 13, 2016

## The Tales They Tell

Big Dance Theater and Noche Flamenca dissect and reconnect narratives



Tymberly Canale in Big Dance Theater's *Summer Forever*. Photo: Paula Court

Once upon a time, dances told their stories the way fairytales and plays did; they began at the beginning, charted the conflicts that led to a climax, and slid into a denouement. Martha Graham with her Cubist deconstructions of space and time was among the first choreographers to alter the expected narrative flow. After postmodernism worked its wiles on dance, devices of remembering the past, projecting the future, comparing evidently dissimilar works, breaking the fourth wall, and using text and media became common practice. Who could predict what could illumine what?

Big Dance Theater is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year with a two-week season at The Kitchen. Sifting through my memories of the extraordinary dance-theater works created by its artistic directors, Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, one element that stands out is the unlikely juxtapositions they visit upon literary works, films, history, dance, and political events. The results are fascinating— neither jolting nor pretentious, and they leave you no time to be puzzled. Afterward, you may wonder, say, how Parson and Lazar came to mingle Richard Nixon's private Oval Office tapes with accounts of 19<sup>th</sup>-century “wild child” Kaspar Hauser and archival filmed images of a great kabuki artist. (*Plan B*,

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2004). Or what prompted them to rub together the films *Dr. Zhivago* and *Terms of Endearment*, plus the 1970s zeitgeist in *Alan Smithee Directed this Play* (2014). Yet that friction creates sparks that, in the end, illuminate their sources.

It's always entrancing to watch the company's gifted performers—some of whom have been a part of Big Dance Theater for a decade or more—field movement, words, props, and costume changes amid film clips, and scenic elements; they can slip into a character, out of it, and into another with almost shocking dexterity.

I must confess that I would have loved to see a new evening-long work to celebrate BDT's 25<sup>th</sup> year, and *Big Dance: Short Form (Stick, Sled, Slippers, Hearth, Bundle, Ball)* is a collection of six short works, or excerpts from works—a serious (if also giddy) way of revisiting the company's past, its range, and its priorities. Too, who doesn't love an intermission that turns into a party with beer, snacks, and games for the audience? Want to play ping-pong? Stick your head through one of the holes in a painted cardboard amusement-park family? Lazar, wearing a wig that could have belonged to an 18<sup>th</sup>-century gentleman, strolls around conversing with folks over a microphone. A gracious drag queen whose name I didn't catch plays hostess.

Lazar's voice-overs provides brief information about each piece's history, while cast members in puffy white jackets move scenery and clean up. Tei Blow, Joe Levasseur, and Oana Botez provided a score, lighting, and costumes respectively—all terrific.

I must have needed an intellectual warm-up, because I didn't quite catch what *Summer Forever* was about, except that the wonderful Tymberly Canale dances with a portable electric log fire nearby and hangs her coat smugly on a hook that doesn't exist—not noticing when the coat falls to the floor. She ponders a stick. The voice of Cynthia Hopkins (often a vivid BDT performer) mentions a village and a date (did I hear 1590, the year of a terrible earthquake in Austria?), the voices jabbering in the music turn strangely evil, and Canale, after stepping out in some vigorous dancing, finishes in a chair, with a scream, a bit of talking, and a collapse backward.

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Aaron Mattocks of Big Dance Theater in *Short Ride Out (3): He Rides Out*. Photo: Paula Court

Aaron Mattocks dances *Short Ride Out (3): He Rides Out*, a solo inspired by Stravinsky's Concerto for Two Pianos (Parson choreographed *Short Ride Out (2)* for ballerina Wendy Whelan, which may be why Mattocks dons a long white tutu part way through). Mattocks is splendid in the big-dancing solo—vigorous, fierce, and urgent most of the time, yet once grabbing the stick that Canale had used and briefly hobbling like an old man. The only flaw is that this “short” dance feels long.

Parson and Lazar come up with some fascinatingly recondite sources. Who but Parson would create a duet called *Resplendent Shimmering Topaz Waterfall* based on page 79 of *Costume in Face* that the program describes as “notebook notations of work by Tatsumi Hijikata transcribed by his disciples?” Who but she would sleuth out references to dancing lessons in Samuel Pepys' diaries and be inspired to make another duet, *The Art of Dancing?*

The first duet reinvents the strange, primal images given birth by the founder of Japan's rebellious postwar dance form, *butoh*. It's a mystifying little scene, an interpretation of a text perhaps epitomized by those four words. The stage is dominated by a tin tub, into which a suspended bag of ice melts, one rhythmic drop at a time. Lazar wears rather splendid rags and undergoes a series of states of mind—now strong, now tottering, travelling almost not at all, and letting his face reflect discomfiting emotional shifts.

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Canale, disguised by a pseudo-Japanese wig, performs various services, slipping the stick into his hand when he needs a crutch; but goes beyond the usual kabuki stage-manager job when Lazar repeatedly staggers backward and needs catching.

Elizabeth DeMent and Mattocks perform *The Art of Dancing* wearing big curly wigs and shimmering gold pants. Their moves suggest, without copying, the elaborate court dance forms of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the two also mime writing on the floor and flourish booklets containing Pepys' words. The choice of that text and Mattocks' occasional delivery of them are deliciously witty. His wife wants dancing lessons. Pepys, looking in on one, tries some steps and is hooked—also rather proud of his burgeoning skill. When his wife wants another month of lessons with Mr. Pemberley (twice a day even!), he confesses to a smidgeon of jealousy. Mattocks plays this beautifully—almost giddily enthusiastic about dancing but a bit slow to get what we are already laughing about. Both dancers end up piping happily on recorders and voguing as they carry the fireplaces away.



*Goats* (L to R): Elizabeth DeMent, Aaron Mattocks, and Jennifer Liu. At back: Tymberley Canale. Photo: Paula Court

*Goats*, the most substantial piece on the program, reminds us of what clever fun BDT can wreak on a text—in this case, Johanna Spyri's saccharine 1881 children's classic, *Heidi*. The heroine not only triumphs over orphan-hood in the Alps with a

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grouchy grandfather, she turns him into a nice guy, romps on the hills with the goatherd, and helps sickly wheelchair-bound Clara to walk again. Prayer is a valued strategy.

The BDT performers have a wonderful time with *Goats*, and Botez's layered versions of peasant attire are outrageous. Sweet voices tra-la-la on a scratchy record. Spoken words convey minimal details of the plot. But, true to this company's own way of layering, DeMent not only plays the invalid Clara, she uses quite another voice and a mastery of the uses and variants of the verb "fuck" when she plays the epically temperamental and frustrated director of an upcoming performance of *Heidi*. She berates the four others (Canale, Mattocks, Jennie Liu, and Enrico D. Way), who spend a lot of time looking puzzled by her confusing commands and negative blare, although sometimes, they form a ring and do happy dances when playing Heidi and her mountain friends. That is, when they're not doubling as the characters in the story. One minute, Mattocks is the grandfather, then he's a stoic actor, then a pal, or maybe a goat. *Goats* is both silly and clever, staged with fine timing and a lot of brio.

Happy Anniversary, Big Dance Theater! I raise a glass/cup/flagon/wineskin to thank you for past pleasures and look forward to your next big endeavor. How about a sacred legend of India and a bicycle race meeting up? (just kidding. . . I think).