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DANCE

Small Packages for a Big Anniversary

Big Dance: Short Form

The Kitchen
Through Jan. 16

By ROBERT GRESKOVIC

Big Dance Theater—a small-scale dance-theater organization led by co-artistic directors Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, who are husband and wife—has chosen to dwell on the smaller side to celebrate its 25th anniversary. “Big Dance: Short Form,” a 90-minute production, presents a series of shorter, stand-alone works and also includes an onstage intermission, a carnival-like birthday party that the audience is encouraged to join. For this run—with their sometimes shared props and with white-clad scene-changers setting up and clearing each part—these discrete works get strung into a continuous stream, their interconnection suggesting that however much Ms. Parson and Mr. Lazar want to go short or smaller this time, they can’t fully break with their proclaimed longstanding emphasis on the “Big” in the troupe’s name.

Bigness, however, ultimately feels least evident in the isolated dance dimensions of these offerings. Before the intermission’s party atmosphere, with Mr. Lazar as a kind of boisterous barker making sometimes painfully forced “conversation,” “Short Form” includes four dances, two solos and two duets. These range in duration from six minutes to about 15 minutes.

The solos, “Summer For-

PAULA COURT



Aaron Mattocks in Big Dance Theater’s 25th anniversary program.

ever” (2012) and “Short Ride Out (3): He Rides Out” (2005), contrast in appearance. The former, danced by Tymberly Canale, has a grounded, folk-dance air; the latter, performed by Aaron Mattocks, has a more formal, presentational, showy tone. Neither amounts to much more than a casual meander for their barefoot dancers.

Of the duets, created last year, “The Art of Dancing,” an arch riff on some 17th-century diary entries by Samuel Pepys by way of breathy readings and intermittent prancings by Elizabeth DeMent and Mr. Mattocks, similarly dressed and bewigged, unfolds in snippets. The evocatively named “Resplendent Shimmering Topaz Waterfall” gives the program its most low-key element and its most distinguished work. The 10-minute duet takes inspiration from a page of notations documenting the work of Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-1986), the innovative Japanese dancer considered a founding father of Japan’s Butoh, sometimes known as

dance of utter darkness.

Opening in near-silence with Mr. Lazar looking like a tramp draped in a macramé poncho—the only sound heard is that of water slowly dripping from a bag of melting ice—the eventual duet includes a similarly eccentric-looking and behaving Ms. Parson. As interpreted by Ms. Parson and Mr. Lazar, Hijikata’s phrases such as “shrinking in sleep” led them to arrange a series of often small-scale moves and gestures alongside interactions with props—a crutch, for instance. These all delicately accumulate and slowly draw the viewer into their curious world.

Following the gaudy atmosphere of the intermission’s party, which many audience members seemed to join eagerly, the bill climaxes with “Goats.” This 30-minute display of theatrics, first presented in 2009, is based on “Heidi,” the sentimental 1881 children’s novel by Johanna Spyri. It could hardly come as a surprise to anyone watching

the Big Dance Theater show at this point that the homespun surface of the classic source would be undercut and diffracted.

The offbeat Parson/Lazar tone of “Goats” is set by the opening segment’s listlessly clanking cowbell and is off and running with the frequent commentary from Ms. DeMent as a sarcastic theater director putting her players through a messy rehearsal. Her four-letter-word-laced directorial commands clash with the amateur theatrical readings by the cast of characters as they intone bits of Spyri’s story of an orphan girl, her earnest elders and the wheelchair-bound crippled girl for whom the fresh air of the Alpine clime in Heidi’s world holds healing powers. All but Ms. DeMent’s director-character intermittently play the eponymous ruminants, whom she climatically addresses in exasperation as “you f—in’ goats.”

Theater effects, such as manipulated props, histrionics and line readings, account for the bigger part of “Goats.” Its dance portions come more as brief asides in the form of folk-dance ring formations, herding clusters and dance-step accentuations enlivening Alpine songs.

Dance theater, big or small, depends on an artfully calibrated blend of these two emphases. Big Dance Theater’s anniversary program is long on occasionally imaginative theatrics and short on moves that make their own language count.

Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.