

PATTERNS

Sally Banes

Molissa Fenley and Dancers
The Kitchen
59 Wooster St. (Sept. 13-16)

"If Lucinda Childs and Laura Dean got married," a friend mused after we'd seen Molissa Fenley's *Mix*, "their child would be just like Molissa Fenley."

Fenley, a young choreographer who has given four works in New York City over the past year, belongs to a generation that has a rich heritage from various modes of post-modern dance. Both Childs and Dean often work with geometric floor patterns and repetitive phrasing. Yet there are enormous differences between their styles, and Fenley has obviously learned from both.

Childs' group dances have been rather short — averaging about 10 minutes — and consist of precise phrases that are varied minutely so that the final work is the concise set of variations on a single shape and rhythm. The excitement in watching the dance comes from the way the pattern shifts slightly, almost imperceptibly, challenging the eyes and ears as well as the intellect; the dancers are distanced from the audience, becoming like fine instruments tracing out a baroque design.

Dean, on the other hand, often uses movement systems that are quite simple, in unchanging, hypnotic, long stretches of dancing. What we finally pay attention to in these works is not the rigorous intricacy of the choreography, but rather the

personal style of each dancer, playing his or her role in the homeostatic dance.

Fenley combines aspects of both kinds of pattern choreography. Her arrangements are complex, often asymmetric, and ever-changing; one looks for a strict structure in the floorplan — the kind of shape one sees immediately in Dean, or finally grasps in Childs — because the eight-count rhythmic phrases provide such a strong, regular beat. But no single spatial design remains for long. The elusiveness of the structure entices one to keep track of repetitions and contrasts. But the individuality of the dancers' styles and bodies also become salient as they make idiosyncratic gestures, dance one against three or two against two, smile animatedly at each other. Each dancer (John Bernd, Fenley, Kate McLaughlin, Elizabeth Streb) wears a shiny outfit in a different color, adding to the emphasis on singularity.

There's a lot about the movement that is fresh and energetic. During the first, longest section, when the only accompaniment to the movement is the clapping and stamping of the dancers (the floor is miked and an Echoplex delays the sounds, so that we hear them twice), the dancing at first has a regular, straightforward shape. The dancers move around a circle counterclockwise, mixing stamping and shuffling modes of locomotion, taking turns moving in and out of the center. Sometimes they bunch up so that two are in the middle and two are in one corner, but they always return to their positions on the circle, like square dancers with a definite, if mysterious, set of protocols. Each claps a different pattern on the eight-count standard, so there is always a base line of rhythm, which each dancer joins

and leaves. They scoot back from the center with heads down, hips wiggling, arms stretched forward, an eccentric scurry that becomes emblematic.

Suddenly the clapping stops and the dancers break into individual activities — galloping, whirling, hopping. The circle breaks up and then resumes; the clapping starts again but is interrupted frequently whenever the four gather at the center of the space to lay a hand gently on each neighbor's shoulder. There is a kind of sweetness, a sincere intimacy communicable to the audience, that contrasts pleasantly with the precision of the clapping. There is also a cheerful sloppiness that is both endearing and refreshing.

After about half an hour the dancers pick up sandblocks and start a new movement motif; their hands and arms are no longer free. They step closer to each other, casting glances and smiling coyly at each other as they rub the blocks together in syncopated rhythms. Certain sections from the first part are repeated, and then, about 10 minutes later, the dancers trade sandblocks for maracas and, having systematically heightened the noise level, they stop.

When *Mix* had gone on for around 10 minutes I thought it was the most wonderful new dancing I'd seen for a long time. Ten minutes more and it simply seemed dull. Perhaps if the three sections had been equal in length the variety of movements and sounds would have constantly renewed itself. But the first section seemed both too hypnotic and too long. By the time the changes came, with the sandblocks and maracas, my senses had been numbed. Yet I look forward to more dances by Fenley and group; even if her

sense of timing taxes my patience, her movement invention can charm and the social interactions she presents on stage are terrifically appealing.