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## DANCE

DANCE VIEW/Anna Kisselgoff

# Magically, de Keersmaeker Remixes the Familiar

**A**NNE TERESA DE KEERSMAEKER continues to go her own way — a startling and gratifying feat on an experimental dance scene that settles only too easily into definable categories. The evidence was there again when the 31-year-old Belgian choreographer recently presented two North American premieres with her company, Rosas: "Stella" at the Kitchen in New York and the International Festival of New Dance in Montreal, and "Achterland (Hinterland)," performed only in Montreal.

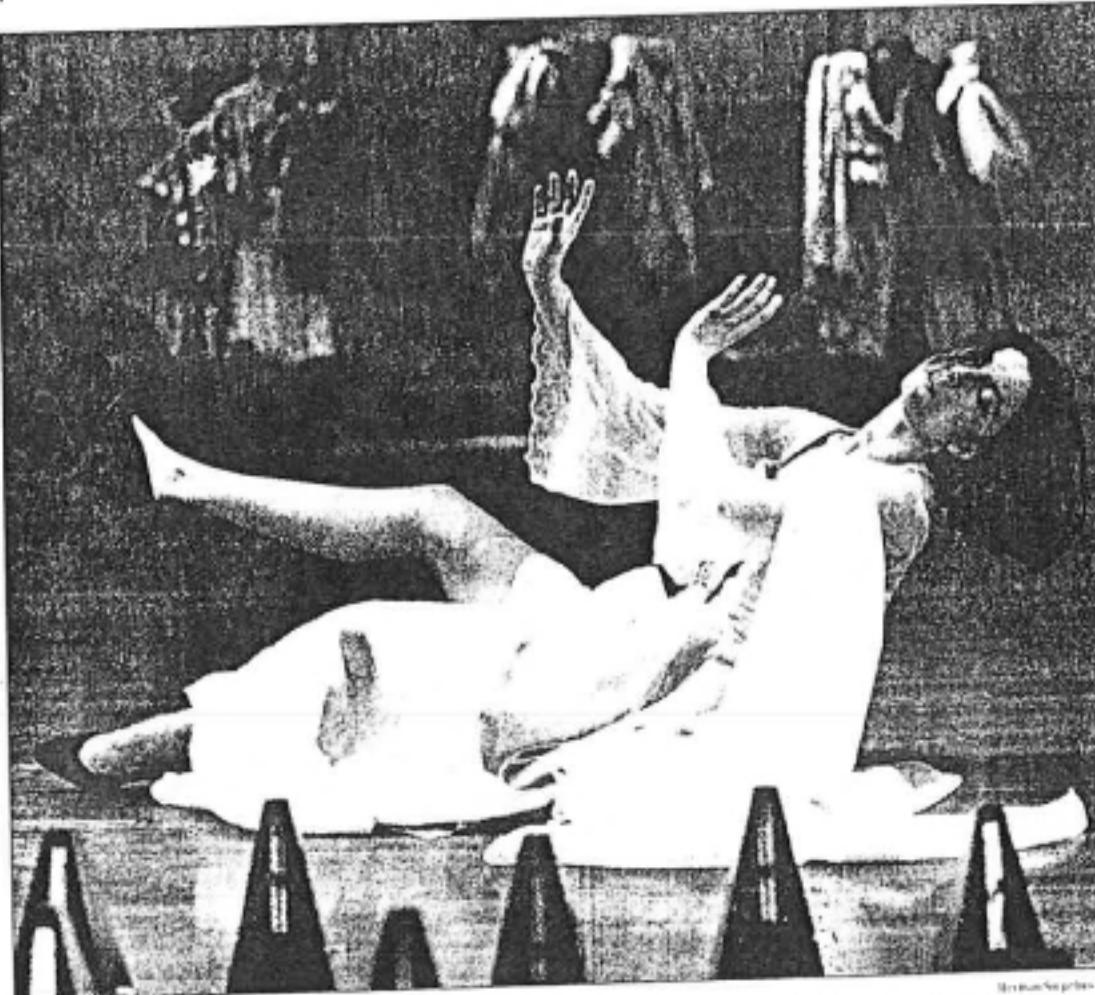
More than in the past, these two pieces from 1990 bring into relief the distinctive qualities of Miss de Keersmaeker's work. Her choreography is both formal and emotional. But it also carries a strong social critique rooted in a literary and political sensitivity that American choreographers would do well to note. Even when some of the cultural references are familiar ("Stella" uses dialogue from Goethe's play "Stella," Akira Kurosawa's film "Rashomon" and the 1951 film version of Tennessee Williams's play "A Streetcar Named Desire"), they are placed in an unfamiliar context. Specific relationships are thus generalized into fresh statements, often about women.

Miss de Keersmaeker burst on the scene in 1983 with "Rosas Danst Rosas," and it was without work's explosively dramatic brand of minimalism that her company made its United States debut at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1986. Her all-female troupe returned there in 1987 with "Elena's Aria." "Elena's Aria," a mixed-media work with film and recited text, had the same precision and movement permutations seen in "Rosas Danst Rosas," but it was less spare, less reductionist in its idiom and more fragmentary in its images. "Stella" and "Achterland" go further in this direction.

It was once tempting to consider Miss de Keersmaeker as a cross between Lucinda Childs (repetitive patterns) and Pina Bausch (expressionistic gestures within the patterns). The French saw Miss de Keersmaeker's work as "Nordic," expressing an angst that was foreign to the dance-theater they had developed in the 1980's.

Miss de Keersmaeker is certainly aware of the formalism that characterized American experimental dance in the 1980's and 70's. And presumably, like American choreographers in the early 1980's, she turned to patterned dances with a reduced idiom because she was attracted to minimalist music. She used Steve Reich's minimalist scores in her early works.

But unlike other choreographers who used Mr. Reich's modular phases chiefly for structural underpinning, creating blocks of dancing,



Carloota Sogas in Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's "Stella"—virtuosic music used as metaphor rather than a floor plan

she shifted the focus to generate emotional content. It is now clear that Miss de Keersmaeker used the minimalist music of Mr. Reich and Thierry de Mey in the way she currently uses more virtuosic scores: music as metaphor rather than a floor plan.

The link between "Stella" and "Achterland" is the Hungarian composer György Ligeti. The complexity of his pranétudes is heard in both works. In "Achterland" as well there are three difficult violin sonatas by the

Belgian composer Eugène Isaye, matched by a more expansive virtuosity than Miss de Keersmaeker has previously displayed.

Dramatically charged formal patterns define Miss de Keersmaeker's choreography. But music and a social-political sensibility are essential to its profile. This mix distinguishes her work from other categories and labels. It is not American-style pure-dance formalities descended from Merce Cunningham or those who rebelled against him. Nor

is it Japanese Butoh, French dance-theater or Miss Bausch's German variant, with its transmuting of real experiences into theatrical theater.

"Achterland" is the sequel to "Stella," and it is the better piece, more coherent in its juxtaposition of disparate elements and exhibiting an astonishing range of dynamic movement. This invention matches the equally strong precision of the Rosas company, which now includes men in some pieces. The

five women in "Stella" remain enclosed in a hothouse atmosphere; the theme is misremained at the hands of invisible men. "Achterland" is more surprising, or casually playful. The blunting smiles and come-hither looks that the women flash as they rush into energetic leaping solos at the start of "Achterland" signal a new openness. At the close, these women appear bemused and amused by the men who have tried to attract their attention.

Men may be irrelevant to these independent women who dance in tailored suits and high heels, no longer the schoolgirls in socks and pleated skirts of the early works. The choreographer is now dealing with adult images and complex mature relationships.

Women are mistreated in "Rashomon," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and Goethe's "Stella." The theme of the danced "Stella" comes from fragments of dialogue from these works, recited by the dancers. The set

**The choreographer's latest dances deal with complex, mature relationships.**

and eroticism come from another Rosas piece, "Oihune, Ottone." The solo danced by one of the women in "Stella" is that dancer's opening solo in "Achterland."

The question is how much inside information the audience requires. The choreographer would probably say that each piece is open to individual interpretation, and it is true that the aura of each work is conveyed through various elements that come together.

Yet "Stella" changes the meaning of these other texts by putting them in new contexts, and it helps to know that "Rashomon" pivots on the same story being told from different viewpoints. This effect is what the choreographer herself is attempting by placing one idea in different contexts. Such literary springboards are relevant, if they are not apparent to the audience, if de Keersmaeker's piece loses something in translation, even if the words are recited in English.

One can admire a rich multilevel experience of this sort. But it is just as obvious that Miss de Keersmaeker speaks more powerfully and persuasively through movement. In a piece without words like "Achterland," the dancers' falls, dives and slides to the floor are extraordinary, as are their minute isolated movements. The choreography is nothing short of daring.