

THE KITCHEN

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NEW DANCING: COUPLES AND SOLOS

By ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER

Anne Livet, director of performing arts at the Fort Worth Art Museum, writes in her new book, *Contemporary Dance*, "There was a radicalism in the 1960's, an attitude of revolution which encouraged innovation." To this she adds, "an interesting point is that no new generation of choreographers has emerged to question the concepts of choreographers of the 1960's as Merce Cunningham's had been challenged a decade earlier." I must disagree. Something new is happening in dance in the work of a new generation of dancers and choreographers and some of the "older" dancers whose work has continued to evolve. There is a returning interest in professionalism and in closely plotted structures which harkens back to the fifties. But, in all its forms dance has been permanently marked by the aesthetics of the 60's and early 70's which asserted the value of process and improvisation or the alternative approach of using a diagram or structure such as a grid. Of key importance was the concept of using untrained dancers and everyday movements. Echoes of all of these ideas remain underlying motifs in current dance.

The new dance is centered on individuals and not on schools causing the dancer to be almost always their own choreographer. There is a greater emphasis on training than in the immediately preceding period, not the exact steps or positions of, say, the Cunningham dancer, but a more personal and idiosyncratic discipline. In solo performances, extreme control of the body is often used to render the body blank or machine-like, devoid of a specific personality, a screen registering internal action. It is conceived of as the silent witness of minute changes in muscles and the passage of energy. Couple and ensemble dancing has retained some of the freshness of the heyday of improvisation, but it too is giving a closer look to structure, inventing extremely complex sequences which if they do not fulfill our normal expectations of "plot" set precedents about what our expectations might become.

SOLOS

Lucinda Childs' new work (*The Kitchen*, October 24-28) is a synthesis of the highly trained modern or ballet dancer and the use of ordinary movement by "untrained" dancers. Her work has always been extremely pared down, but now she has moved away from the use of systems, grids, or lines which charac-

terized much of her work of the 70's. In her recent solos, her dancing has become more rococo and content laden while continuing a surface severity. Childs has altered her appearance, perhaps in reaction to the baggy pants and suspenders of her part in *Einstein on the Beach* or the loose street clothes worn by the post-modern dancer. She now looks the part of a classic ballet dancer, standing in a consciously aligned upright position, with her hair drawn back tightly in a bun. She has continued using her favored walking movements but they now have a different impact. By eliminating other dancers, we must concentrate more fully on the movement itself. In *Plaza* she paced in a small space, with her arms crisply rotating her body at each turn. The body was tense, but whereas it is the legs which normally appear to give lateral movement, here it was the arms which seemed to control the body. In *Katema*, walking was also the primary movement. Here, the steps became more complex as spirals and spins were added. These circular/circulating movements were a mixture of the swooping turns of waltzing, the gyroscopic spinning of dervishes and something very special and as individual as the whorls of fingerprints. It was as if she was listening inward and the movement was dictated by a seismographic reading she was taking of the electrical impulses of her body.

Dance is generally a human-centered art, the presence of the body making it impossible to escape the emotionalism elicited by our response to the language of its gestures. Childs has succeeded in effacing herself (which seems her aim) and forces awareness of the pure abstraction of line, the circuitry of her movement.

COUPLES

Couple dancing is always for me one of the primary tests of dance and offers one of the best ways to compare the achievements of post-modern dance with ballet or modern dance. The choreographing of intimate partner dancing which mimics 19th century notions about the relations of the sexes is a regular component of ballet and modern dance. Although it is possible to program the steps, the sparkle of genuine interaction which removes the dance from empty ritual is often absent, because the steps are only reflections of defunct situations. Post modern dance with its dependence on improvisation as the main source for composition has

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virtually eliminated the possibility of merely mechanical movement. Some of the most exciting moments now happen between two individuals as their gestures play off each other, expressing a genuine interaction. The notion of partnering is no longer limited arbitrarily to male/female pairs and the dances reflect the changed attitudes of society about the proper activity for each gender.

Charles Dennis and Yoshiko Chuma's series of dances (October 27-29) were illustrative of the new thinking in dance and society. The work evolved from improvisation and the sequence of tightly woven together discrete incidents represent the characteristic methods of interacting between the dancers. The two move together in what can be seen as a non-didactic dialogue on the new meaning of masculine and feminine relationships. Clad in a skirt, it is Chuma who has the hard percussive movements and Dennis is often the softer force. They act independently of each other, each doing their own dance, yet always returning to mutually supportive movement.

They are often funny and humor is a rare and refreshing quality to find in the avant-garde. At one point Chuma circles the floor, shuffling, making her feet hard and her body rigid with a comical wobble creeping in occasionally. Dennis follows behind her, alternately moving closer and then further away, framing her with his looser walk/run steps. Neither a frightening Golem nor the romantic awakened doll of Coppelius, Chuma presents herself in the robot-like movement and her delight and pleasure in it. At another point, perhaps commenting on the 1978 family who exercises together to stay together, Dennis and Chuma do a movement like push-ups on the floor. At short intervals they collapsed from their exertions and lay on the floor twitching, a gesture that was overwhelmingly funny in the context of the rest of the piece.

Pooh Kaye calls *Thick as Thebes* (The Kitchen, Nov. 27-29) a movement and image collaboration and gives the four dancers—Claire Bernard, Yoshiko Chuma, Nina Lundberg and herself equal credit as the originators of the work. The dancers developed the dance together improvisationally and to a large extent were permitted the autonomy to make their own dances within Kaye's umbrella structure.

Kaye's work, as is Dennis and Chuma's, is marked by the new choreography. *Thick as Thebes* is non-linear (although the activity is framed by a definite beginning and end) and lacks a storyline. Yet, it is tightly crafted and its discrete units are pieced together with their own internal logic. The picaresque approach only gives the appearance of fragility at points in the middle when long pauses (employed as rest from violent activity) caused some nervousness as one was given time to wonder if they knew what they were doing next.

Kaye has worked extensively with Simone Forti and has borrowed from her the idea of observing animals and using their characteristic methods of expressing themselves as a way of generating a new movement vocabulary. Kaye's dance often seemed as if it were the visual equivalent of *The Carnival of the Animals* with each species being introduced in turn. The presentation of each "animal" had the literalness and minute detail of diagrams of mating and grooming habits. But the overt natural history aspect of the dance in no way lessened its effect. With an overwhelming immediacy, the dancers were at once magical, frightening, erotic and funny.

The best dancing happened in pairs. At one point, Nina Lundberg entered completely into the character of a giant bird—her whole body arching aggressively over her partner, her arms bent at an avian angle, with terrifying bird noises coming from her mouth. She had become the creature she impersonated. At another point, the group broke into couples. Making convex arcs of their bodies they bounced themselves off each other's chests in an unusual two-part kissing and recoiling stroke. Towards the end, Chuma and Kaye separated themselves from the group and imitated monkeys. Squatting face to face in a patch of earth they mischievously threw dirt in each other's faces and then tenderly wiped it off, each time pretending it would not happen again.

In choosing images of play and animal behavior, Kaye has given the dancers a broader range of movement than is normally thought proper or possible for women. Without being masculine, whatever that means, the women are conceived of being capable of doing everything—and they do. •

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