

LESS THAN WHAT'S THERE

Nancy Goldner

Andrew deGroat and Dancers
The Kitchen, April 1-5

Some 12 hours after the event, I see crackling stag leaps, two shoulders spared collision by a hair's breadth, arabesques arranging and rearranging themselves within a frame of light, the fragile curve between Andrew deGroat's hips and waist, galumphing sashays, walking, walking, walking, Angie Smit's deep instep about to break the soles of her shoes, walking faster, running now, a squiggle in the corner, deGroat's wraith of a smile, a straggler, sweat, fourth position, another

near-collision, walking in circles, some gangly pas de chat, the march westward, glissade-assemble, give her a heave, walking, walking, walking fast, faster.

Not at all in the order of these actions did Andrew deGroat present three dances. The first, made in 1978, was *Portraits of American Dancers*, to 11 preludes by Chopin. The other two were premieres and may or may not be companion pieces. *Dutch Circumstances (DUST)* has a new score for French children's voices and other sounds by Nicolas Frize. (*GRAVY*) *A Medicine of Spaces* is set to Julius Eastman's *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, a lush incantation for 10 cellos. All of the music is arresting; needless to say, the combination of Chopin and the two contemporary composers is startling, invigorating.

As if to reinforce that juxtaposition, deGroat arranged the program so that the Chopin dance fed right into Frize. At the end of the Chopin the dancers retreat into the shadows of the stage's perimeters. All is calm. Then we hear eerie whirrings and harsh crackles, and the dancers bound

back into the open space with rhythms and dynamics as different from Chopin as Frize is. Of course. Yet it was that wrench from Chopin that made the big impression of the evening. Chalk it up to Chopin and to the pale yet steady luminosity of the dance, to its self-assurance and soft austerities; the rest of the evening felt like an inconclusive melange of images.

Many of those images are potent, which is one reason why it's puzzling to have vague reactions to deGroat's dances. Nor do those images float unattached from a subject. It is possible to pull out of a miscellaneous, tangential and strung-together event a kind of central event: locomotion. The first of the nine solos in *Portraits of American Dancers* is a fancy trek on a long diagonal, in which Gail Donnenfeld presents her body in complex silhouettes. Like the pioneers in *Billy the Kid*, I thought. At the end everyone treads across the space in the opposite direction, as unobtrusively as possible. Minimal dance?

Dutch Circumstances (DUST) is a pánoply of walks. My god, what tearing around! Circling, crisscrossing, lunging

clear down the center of a plaza, doing laps around the outer edges of a four-pillared gym. Later on the walking combinations are smaller scaled but more complicated, and finally obsessively intricate. Naturally the dance has to stop in this amusing rat's nest, and there has to be an intermission for the dancers to mop up the sweat.

In (*GRAVY*) *A Medicine of Spaces* deGroat uses the group as elements in an abstract painting rather than as movers. Instead of defining space by conquering it, they embellish the space laid out for them. Quite elegantly, too. Yet in closing *GRAVY* with a solemn processional, which reminded me of the march of the tattered survivors of war in *The Green Table*, deGroat does bring one back to the evening's tonic chord. The thing is, I didn't feel an internal line of direction in all the walking, so it doesn't matter that an occasional signpost or cross reference crops up along the route.

Another reason why the evening was less powerful than it should have been is

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that the music, all played live, was unusually stimulating. So, too, is deGroat's use of music. Unlike many of his contemporaries, deGroat is eager to capture not only meter but the atmosphere of the music he chooses. Daringly, he'll take music at its face value. What one hears is what one sees: stag leaps to "stag leap" music, walks in exact accordance with the force of the beat, crumbs of dance phrases

to transitional moments in the music. Congruence between music and dance can be heady, and deGroat seems to relish the high drama he can derive from musical support. He also knows how to express music's tonalities from a contrasting underside. In *GRAVY* deGroat gets at Eastman's urgencies in an interestingly oblique way. The movement is composed, even limpid, but the ever-changing relationships between the dancers create a pressure equal to those of Eastman's

vibrating cellos.

Why, then, no click? Much might be attributed to the dancers' execution. Sometimes they seemed downright unsure about what phrase was to come next. They eyed each other's orbits with caution. Not enough rehearsal? More importantly, a majority of the eight dancers seemed unable to develop the choreography's dynamics to their fullest dimensions, unable, that is, to show us the music at its face value. Sometimes a smile grazed

deGroat's face, registering either happy surprise at another's invention or amused dismay at what I surmised to be logistical screw-ups. Those smiles made for some of the loveliest moments of the concert, but I'm glad to report that deGroat did not smile over the technical insufficiency of his ensemble. It's not the kind of mistake one can fix up with a barking command, which deGroat had to use at one point, to get the lights on. It's the kind of mistake that renders a dance on the verge of itself •

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