

DANCE VIEW/Anna Kisselgoff

Taking No Chances With Romance

THE EMBRACE THAT IS ALSO A stranglehold, the caress that becomes a blow: Images of this sort have emerged with surprising ferocity in new choreography. These obsessive love-hate motifs are often criticized when they surface in the ballet world, but they are accepted and admired when explored in modern dance.

The recurrence of such themes says something about where dance is going at present. This direction, albeit not universal, is toward treating personal relationships with more frankness and complexity than in the past. It isn't, however, just women's liberation or gay rights that have opened doors. Modern dance's identification with psychological theories went out in the great dance rebellion of the 1960's: freed of Freud and Jung, an entire generation of choreographers refused to consider human relations at all.

When the pendulum swung the other way in the 1980's, when formal concerns in movement yielded again to interest in dramatic interaction, the problem was how to pick up the pieces, how to distill emotion in new terms without resorting to clichés.

In recent concerts by Susan Marshall, Stephen Petronio and the DV8 group from England, for instance, subjugation and domination were clearly suggested in various duets. But the clarity of a relationship was paradoxically expressed in movement that was ambiguous. There were few literal gestures. If there were, they were transformed by the quality with which the movement was executed. A handshake became hostile when turned into a yank, a mutually supportive phrase lost its tenderness when one partner was suddenly forced upon another, an embrace became a contest of wills.

Miss Marshall and Mr. Petronio are typical of young choreographers for whom movement concerns are primary. One can view their work on the level of movement alone; their strong suite is their inventiveness in building structures and phrases. Fleeting juxtaposed collages for Mr. Petronio, startling continuity for Miss Marshall).

Yet, the truth is that they are not just offering a formal display; their dancers, albeit nameless characters, operate simultaneously on another level of fleeting subtext. Emo-

In recent duets from Susan Marshall, Stephen Petronio and DV8, subjugation and domination are clearly suggested.

tional relationships are not spelled out — they are sensed — often in movement that can be interpreted or “read” in more ways than one.

Interestingly, one of the first to pave the way toward this thematic genre was Peter Martins in his first ballet, “Calcium Light Night,” in 1977-78. His face-pushing duet for a man and woman looked abstract but led an interviewer on public television’s “Dance in America” series to ask Mr. Martins whether he was depicting love or hate here. “What’s the difference?” the choreographer replied.

There is no need to psychoanalyze Mr. Martins, merely to suggest that his equation of equally strong emotions has since been picked up overtly by modern-dance choreographers. It is a view that Strindberg, in his plays about male-female relations, would have recognized.

And yet, when Mr. Martins, at the New York City Ballet, turned again to imagery suggestive of raw emotions between men and women, the reactions, from critics and public, has been to recoil in horror. In the Stravinsky “Tango,” Bart Cook ended the duet with a predatory stance above Heather Watts; in “Tanzspiel,” to a score by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Lindsay Fischer embraced Kyra Nichols and then “strangled” her.

My own reaction was to find these two works distasteful, mainly because of their literalism, not because ballet is unequipped to deal with these matters.

We are, however, prisoners of the post-Romantic view of classical ballet. According to such esthetic theories, art is by nature artificial, and ballet especially has an ideal

DANCE



Martha Swope

Eileen Thomas and David Dorfman in Susan Marshall's "Interior With Seven Figures"—tenderness out of violence

function. Ballet can embody an idea; like poetry, it is evocative. What it does not do, by its inherent nature (a manifestly artificial way of moving), is depict real life.

That is why Antony Tudor felt compelled to create an analogy between a Greek myth and "Undertow," his ballet about a prostitute's murderer. (Even in 1945, this victim was choked within an embrace.) In 1951, Jerome Robbins in "The Cage" couched a theme of castrating females as a parable about insects.

The love-hate motif was already present in "La Sylphide." Even today, the Royal Danish Ballet dances August Bournonville's 1836 version in two ways. Usually, we see a light-hearted sylph fall in love with a mortal. But in Mette Honningén's performance, she

is portrayed as a demonic creature. Romantic ballet does not deal with romance but, in the search for an ideal, the impossibility of romance.

Modern dance sought, historically and originally, to express the life around us. Whether it has done so any more universally than ballet is open to debate. The truth is that life in both strains of dance has been expressed best in symbols and allegories.

■

Even Mark Morris, in his comedic "One Charming Night," turns up as vampire who visits a milkmaid: the kiss as bite, the perfect symbol of the love-hate motif.

The new choreographers in both ballet and modern dance belong to a generation suspi-

cious of romance. The modern dancers, however, have discovered a way of moving in which simulated violence can metamorphose into tenderness. Contact improvisation, a movement technique that is related to Chinese martial arts, is not unknown to Miss Marshall, for instance. The rambling obscurity of her full-evening "Interior With Seven Figures" (shown last month at the Brooklyn Academy of Music) did not diminish the stunning power of the work's central duet. A husband (David Dorfman) and wife (Eileen Thomas) are locked in a lethal globular wrestling hold, their lips pressed together in a kiss — forcing themselves upon each other with mutual strength until there are no victors, only mutual prisoners.