

DANCE VIEW/Jack Anderson

On Triptychs, Corsets and Other Imponderables

CLUTTERED DANCES CAN BE as unsightly as littered streets. Mark Taylor and Stephen Petronio are talented choreographers, and they both presented fine works last month during the "Altogether Different" series of modern-dance performances at the Joyce Theater. But they also presented some dances cluttered with theatrical excess.

There was no particular connection between the elaborateness of these productions and the sense of clutter. Mr. Taylor's "Mor-

Two premieres were burdened with scenery and costuming that cluttered rather than enhanced.

tal Drift" was undeniably grand in scale. And everything in it appeared to belong.

The work began with five white-clad people sitting serenely on swings. Then, to music by Scott Killian, they descended to earth like guardian angels and guided the affairs of six agitated people. They certainly empathized with those people: during one scene in which the mortals fought, the angels winced at each blow, even though the angels themselves were not physically touched.

Although Mr. Taylor did make one wonder if his divine guides, with their constant manipulations of the other characters, were turning into infernal busybodies, "Mortal Drift" ultimately was not as effective as it promised to be because some of its dramatic situations were fuzzy. Nevertheless, whatever weaknesses it may have had, the work didn't seem fussy.

Mr. Taylor's "Devotion," in contrast, was. Indeed, it was almost literally unwatchable because the dancers were dwarfed by the enormous triptych by Vincent Desiderio that served as scenery. One panel showed a man with earphones gazing into a periscope; an-

other panel was dominated by a solemn baby; the third depicted a man leaning before a rectangle that could have been the opening in a confessional.

The dancers who moved in front of this painting — to music by Elise Tobin — rushed in agitation, clinging to one another, only to separate a moment later. When they were not looking anxious, they looked forlorn. Yet the changes in movement quality seemed arbitrary, and the hurlyburly had little impact, partly because the looming set prevented viewers from concentrating on the choreography. And possibly only Mr. Taylor and Mr. Desiderio know how the triptych is connected with the dancing or even how its panels are thematically related.

Like Mr. Taylor, Mr. Petronio creates visually striking dances. He is a turbulent choreographer who sweeps his dancers up into whirlwinds. But, as in the past, these storms appear to do no lasting damage. Mr. Petronio is interested in the harnessing, as well as the unleashing, of energy.

That concern was evident in "Surrender II," a remarkable duet for himself and Jeremy Nelson. At the outset, Ken Tabachnik's lighting designs enclosed the dancers in a brightly lighted square that evoked a boxing ring. Later, a spotlight picked the dancers out as if to put them on display. But, no matter how much the lighting changed, the men continued to grapple.

At first glance, this duet, to music by David Linton, represented a power struggle. Yet it gradually became something else. In addition to hoisting each other, Mr. Nelson and Mr. Petronio leaned against each other. By providing mutual support, they made "Surrender II" a portrait of two people willingly exchanging power, with their ferocious energy tempered by mutual trust.

Power was also an implicit theme in Mr. Petronio's "Middlesex Gorge." Eight people kept going in and out of control, to rock music by Gareth Jones and a British group called Wire. When dancers were not lifting and lugging one another or gathering into gnarled clusters, they were twisting away and flinging themselves loose. "Middlesex Gorge" should have been exciting. But its very ap-



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Ruby Washington/The New York Times

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the 1960's many dances have been in the nude. However, no matter how clothed or partially naked they may otherwise have been, all the men in "Middlesex Gorge" wore corsets. And *that* was a problem. Why corsets?

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Perhaps Mr. Petronio was making a sly comment on the Madonna and MTV school of haute couture, but much more serious theories could help explain the corsets. Here's one: the tempestuous choreography implied that, unlike the men in "Surrender II," those in "Middlesex Gorge" acted as if they felt

they were required to be aggressive and that any other kind of conduct was unmanly. These men were constricted by concepts of behavior as outdated as corsets.

That, at least, is one interpretation. It may or may not help explain "Middlesex Gorge." Nevertheless, because the corsets can be interpreted in so many ways, from the frivolous to the solemn, they become visual distractions rather than meaningful symbols.

Both Mr. Petronio and Mr. Taylor like to create choreographically dense dances, packed with intricate movements and multiple levels of meaning. But, at the Joyce, they tended to confused complexity with jumble. □



Photographs by Tom Brazil

Dancers from the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Ted Shawn's "Kinetic Molpai"—athleticism used to express spirituality

of tyrannizing choreography for men. The time has come to emphasize other choreographic qualities. The Joyce program hinted at what some of them might be. Men moved lyrically as well as forcefully in "Oatka Trail," Garth Fagan's tribute to nature.

Rick Darnell's "Brides of Frankenstein" was a boisterous piece in which five men wore tutus and a sixth donned a slip to parody conventional notions of male and female images. It was a silly romp. Nevertheless, its tomfoolery implied that men need not be unremittingly solemn in all-male dances.

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to be true — half true. Dance does attract homosexuals. It also attracts heterosexuals.

Nevertheless, male dancers, gay and straight, have been scorned as "sissies." No wonder, then, that they have taken pains to insist upon their masculinity. Shawn certainly did so, since he was personally acquainted with bigotry. As a bisexual, he knew that a whiff of scandal might ruin his career. Off stage, he tried to look like a businessman, and when he spoke of the validity of male dancing, he made comparisons with sports.

Despite his efforts, bigotry still exists, of course. And choreographers continue to stress athletic movement. Even though a few sports stars have admitted that they are homosexual, athletes are popularly regarded as he-men and therefore so the naïve assumption

than athletes. Shawn's gentle solo about St. Francis can serve as a precedent for tender as well as tough male choreography. Let there be more all-male dances in which the performers portray saints, sinners, clowns, fools, lovers, haters, visionaries, bumbler, idealists, maniacs and ordinary citizens. Let this choreography be lyrical, bumptious, reverent, elegant, earthy, sassy and as unpredictable as life itself.

Let there be dances on unabashedly homosexual and heterosexual themes. Let there also be all-male dances that have nothing to do with sexual matters. Surely, audiences familiar with the abstractions of George Balanchine or Merce Cunningham ought to be as



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Because of its physically demanding lifts and balances, "Surrender II" by Stephen Petronio could be viewed as yet another example of athleticism. However, the dancers' interactions also made it possible to interpret the work as a study of two men needing each other — as friends or struggling comrades. Or lovers.

Once this final possibility has been admitted, esthetic and social issues become inseparable. The notion persists that the dance field attracts homosexuals. That notion happens

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The bigots deserve to be defied, and the range of male choreography needs to be widened. So some male dancers are gay and others are straight — so what? Why should fusses about sexual orientation determine what type of dancing is considered legitimate for men? Granted, athleticism is exciting. But male dancers should be allowed to be more

than athletes. Shawn's gentle solo about St. Francis can serve as a precedent for tender as well as tough male choreography. Let there be more all-male dances in which the performers portray saints, sinners, clowns, fools, lovers, haters, visionaries, bumbler, idealists, maniacs and ordinary citizens. Let this choreography be lyrical, bumptious, reverent, elegant, earthy, sassy and as unpredictable as life itself.

Let there be dances on unabashedly homosexual and heterosexual themes. Let there also be all-male dances that have nothing to do with sexual matters. Surely, audiences familiar with the abstractions of George Balanchine or Merce Cunningham ought to be sophisticated enough to view an abstract dance for men as a study in design without automatically interpreting every passage in which men touch or hold one another as a symbol of passion.

Let us have male choreography of unusual variety and imagination. Conceivably, if he were still alive, Ted Shawn — ever the pioneer — might help create it. □