

DANCING

Classical and Modern

IN the old days of postmodern dance—from around 1962 up until five or six years ago—choreographers used to send out press releases tersely announcing “A Concert of Dance” or “New Dance Work.” A title might be given, if one had been chosen; otherwise, the work was not described or characterized in any way. This practice was in line with certain assumptions about dance—that it spoke for itself and expressed nothing outside itself, that it was its own subject. “Dance” was dancing; its artistic substance could be whatever the choreographer wished to make it, provided that it was *pure*, with no programmatic content, or none that could be announced in advance. So entrenched was this view of dance that every time Jules Feiffer’s cartoon appeared of the modern dancer in her leotard and ponytail, announcing “A dance to spring,” you laughed right away, without bothering to read on and see what the dance was “about.” The colleges still taught this stuff, and some weebegone companies still performed it, but in the climate of classical postmodernist New York dance nothing could have been more anachronistic.

Now in its postclassical phase, postmodern dance seems to be about anything but itself. Though it hasn’t exactly reverted to the wistful, life-affirming dance-to-spring days, it has assiduously reprogrammed its aesthetic. I open my mail, and this is the sort of thing that falls out:

“Hope Springs Ridiculous” is a bittersweet exploration of the difficulties and disappointments of everyday life.

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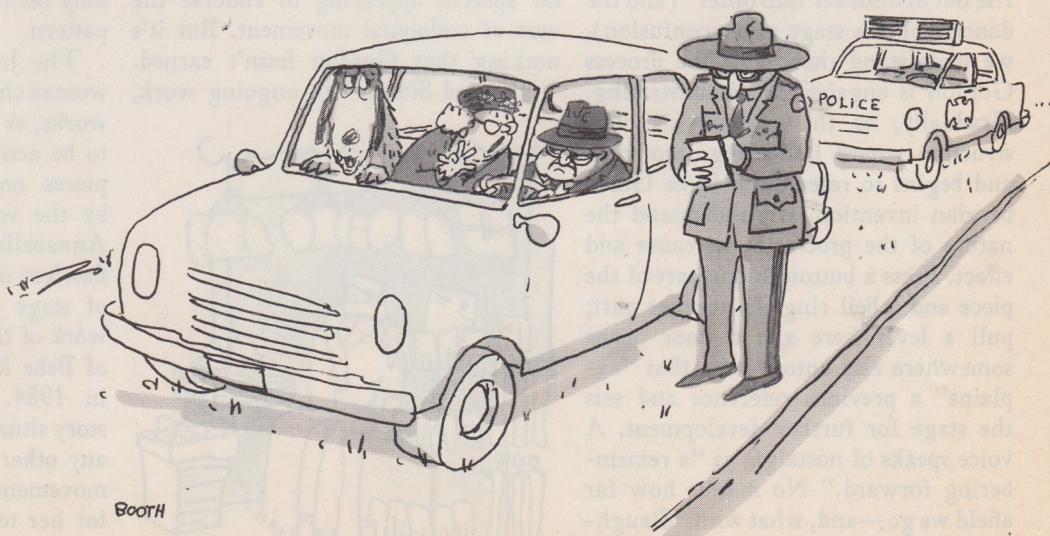
Even choreographers of the old persuasion find it necessary to furnish advance de-

scriptions. For Stephen Petronio’s latest concert, the Kitchen sent out a barrage of information not only about the premiere (“‘AnAmnesia’ unfurls at a relentless pace . . .”) but about Petronio’s work in general. It was not a lot of help. “Mr. Petronio’s group work combines a charged physicality with an architectural vision,” the press kit told me. “The individuality of the dancers stands out against the compositional use of their bodies as pillars, spirals, and walls of movement.”

But I went to Petronio’s concert and found it as bewildering as the language of the press release had made it sound. The chunky sharp-edged shapes and inelastic rhythms appeared blocked and inarticulate, because the releasing mechanism wasn’t where Petronio seemed to be seeking it—in devices of production rather than inside the movement itself. It’s very strange to sit through an intelligently arranged, well-rehearsed, cleanly delivered program of dance and to realize that everyone on the stage, including the choreographer, is depending on externals to make the meaning clear: on scenery and costumes and gestural oddments, such as some finicky hand-and-finger positions that get projected in photographic blowups. It almost seems as if without the paraphernalia the meaning *would* be clear, in a dense kind of way. But choreographers who once trusted to movement are now building onto it a

scaffolding to support a whole other order of suggestion.

Mark Taylor is another choreographer who does disciplined, sophisticated work, and who seems seriously interested in music, too. Not many choreographers are; there has been a general return to music in postmodern circles, but not to music that one would care to hear more than once. In “Xanadu/The Millions” Taylor set a long suite of dances to an amplified cello solo composed and played by Elise Tobin, with bass guitar and synthesizer. The aural mix was mellow and more attractive than the harsh Peter Gordon score used by Petronio, and Taylor’s dances had a corresponding sinuosity and strength. But Taylor, too, went outside his means for meaning—to Italo Calvino’s book of prose poems about Marco Polo, “Invisible Cities,” quotations from which alternated with the music. At Performance Space 122, where the audience sat on both sides of the stage, it was extremely difficult to read the dances as a logical progression; there seemed to be nothing connecting them internally or with Calvino’s book except some Oriental postures and an intermittent current of erotic violence. Maybe Marco Polo, trying wordlessly to report on his travels to Kublai Khan, bringing him souvenirs, was supposed to be an emblem of the choreographer trying to communicate with his audience. From William Weaver’s translation: “The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor; the objects could have various meanings: a quiver filled



“Yoo-hoo! My husband gets the senior-citizen discount!
Yoo-hoo, Officer, yoo-hoo!”

with arrows could indicate the approach of war, or an abundance of game, or else an armorer's shop; an hourglass could mean time passing, or time past, or sand, or a place where hourglasses are made." However, the feeling I got was that ambiguity was Taylor's problem, not his theme.

Connections in the work of David Gordon are always deeply pleasing, and since they start appearing right at the beginning of an evening there's no anxiety about how the various layers of material are going to fit together. At the start of "United States," the newest Gordon piece to be seen in New York (at the Brooklyn Academy), we hear a tape of Robert Frost talking to students; Frost mentions Mozart, and in a minute a Mozart piano concerto begins; the dancers, already onstage and moving, move to the music. Other links are more subtle, but links keep on coming, by means of free association, and Gordon doesn't avoid obvious ones. The pattern has to be sturdy enough to last an evening.

Gordon is a member of the classical postmodernist generation, and though he has always been a collagist, he still holds the purist view that a work of art is always and only about itself, however many other subjects it appears to have. "United States" is a three-part evening constructed from writings and musical compositions having to do with places Gordon knows well—Minnesota, New York, and San Francisco, with New England (Robert Frost) sandwiched in between. Frost becomes the compère of the evening, a kind of stand-in for Gordon himself; when Frost says "We rise out of disorder into order" (and the dancers on the stage mime confusion), we understand that to be the process Gordon is engaged in demonstrating. Gradually, as the rest of his construction comes lumbering into view and begins to resemble a Rube Goldbergian invention, we understand the nature of the process to be cause and effect. Press a button in one part of the piece and a bell rings in another part; pull a lever here and a door opens somewhere else onto a vista that "explains" a previous reference and sets the stage for further development. A voice speaks of nostalgia as "a remembering forward." No matter how far afield we go—and, what with "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" cropping up in the New York section, and pop songs about San Francisco, we do get pretty

far from Robert Frost—we don't lose the thread that pulls us back. Gordon's Pop-art sensibility keeps the evening light, and his discipline keeps the musical-comedy elements from running away with the show. The piece isn't really about any of the places it visits. It prefers legend to truth, and yet its clichés are real; it is true to culture in America.

The richest part of the evening is the dual-system adaptation of "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" as New York street theatre and New York stage theatre. Colloquial dance movement, which Gordon favors, is better suited to Richard Rodgers than it is to Mozart, and it functions here almost as a parody of higher dance forms. But I don't want to suggest that the way it functions in other parts of the piece isn't also interesting. In fact, I was fascinated by the choreography—both the Rube Goldbergian logic of it, setting out in pure-dance terms the operation of the piece as a whole, and the range of performance it inspired, from solo turns such as Valda Setterfield's endearingly batty Jeanette MacDonald (in the San Francisco section) to ensemble work as meticulous as that of a submarine crew under attack. When Frost comes back at the end to talk about what he has elsewhere called "the sound of sense," Gordon celebrates the moment with a mime chorus precisely timed to the rhythm of Frost's words. The mime is Gordonesque: simple conversational gestures of the head and hands, arranged in phrasal units. It's a breathtaking moment, with the great poet, the champion of popular speech, appearing to endorse the uses of colloquial movement. But it's nothing that Gordon hasn't earned.

"United States," an ongoing work,



has attracted a good bit of attention because of the way it is being funded, by a sponsoring network represented in the changing geography of the piece. More locations are planned, but the continuing interest of "United States" lies in the way Gordon adds them up to form a whole. "How to Make a Piece" would not be a bad subtitle, particularly at this moment, when his procedures are being imitated but without a controlling vision. Gordon used to produce his work exclusively in downtown loft theatres, and he would have his dancers talk, enunciating themes that would be developed in dance. On opera-house stages, talking is impractical; he now uses voice-overs. But on smaller stages, like the Joyce, dancers this season burst into speech all the time. In Yoshiko Chuma's "Da Costakada Da Da: A Letter to Van Gogh," they spoke a mixture of languages in a kind of unconscious parallel to the incomprehensible choreography; in Monica Levy's "Hesitation Waltzes," they presumed to startle us with remarks like "A stranger mistook me for his wife." License to talk is not enough; you have to find an occasion for it, as Gordon has time and again. Yet Gordon doesn't really do as a model for a generation so unlike his own in its eagerness to assault the audience. His style is too easygoing, and there's a resolute disinterestedness in his method that can seem passive. Though "United States" is true to American culture, it isn't profoundly true, and the young and restless can come away with the feeling that all the things Gordon has put into it are there only because they make this ingenious pattern.

The Joyce held a series devoted to women choreographers called Womanworks, as if it were unusual for women to be active in modern dance. Of the pieces on view, the solos arranged by the veteran dancer-choreographer Annabelle Gamson stood out for their flawless dynamics and compelling use of stage space. The most promising work of the rising generation was that of Bebe Miller and Company, formed in 1984. Though Miller presented story situations, she didn't use speech or any other extra-dance device, and her movement palette was broad enough for her to shift styles from one to the other of her two pieces, "Habit of Attraction" and "Thick Sleep," with no loss of force. There was also fresh

and shapely movement in Sally Silvers' quartet "Moebius" before it declined into garrulity. In general, most of the works in *Womanworks* went on too long or were composed in phrases too short for their over-all length. Almost none of them exhibited rhythmic versatility in respect to a mood or a situation. And moods, situations, emotions are clearly in.

In *Dance Chance*, a series at Dance Theatre Workshop, presenting more women choreographers, Molissa Fenley danced her "Provenance Unknown," a long solo to Philip Glass music, in a style and demeanor suggestive of the romanticism of the dance-to-spring era. Fenley last season actually did do a dance to spring—she danced bare-breasted to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." The Fenley of "Provenance Unknown" enacted a rite more demure, but one that stretched her modest range as a dancer to the breaking point. Normally, Fenley's style is aerobic; here it was classical academic. This is a heterodox time, but the fact is that Fenley had to fake her turnout, and the only space she could usefully command was a wedge right in front of her. Her movements were complete in terms of intensity of effort but not in terms of plasticity. Everything else was gestural filigree, and wimpy filigree at that.

Fenley is not the only choreographer who seems to think that emotion has to do with gesture. Next on the program was a piece by Wendy Perron that began with two exceptionally well-composed dance duets for two couples who spelled each other. Spatial planes were clearly indicated; dynamics were forcefully explored. Suddenly, some Schubert piano music started up, and the choreographer came out in masculine attire and did a slow downstage cross while performing small-scale mimetic movements. What did this forty-ish woman in drag have to do with the two couples? We could only speculate, for the piece ended as soon as she had made her exit. She could have been the Spirit of Androgyny Past. She could have been Age, Time, an hourglass, or a person who sold cheap watches. Whatever she was, an interesting dance had become a boring drama.

Elizabeth Streb's pieces, which are sports-minded and task-oriented, insistently rule out emotion. I have always found them gruelling and flavorless, but on this program they were refresh-

ing. In "Little Ease," Streb leaped inside a box where, able neither to stretch out nor to sit up, she looked about as comfortable as Alice inside the White Rabbit's cottage. For four minutes or so, Streb tossed and turned with enormous effort, banging into the sides of her prison and betraying no reaction to her predicament. Still betraying no reaction, she leaped out. As it always does in pieces as stern as this, emotion crept in the back door. And in pieces as honest as this the emotion has the power of a true theatrical event.

THE premières at New York City Ballet this season are both by Peter Martins. "Beethoven Romance" is a depiction of the ever-expanding capacities of Kyra Nichols. In pas-de-deux form, it strikes exactly the right balance between Nichols and her partner, Adam Lüders; she is all but self-sufficient, yet she doesn't domineer or overpower him. "Mozart Serenade" is an equally tactful piece, for four pairs of soloists, backed by four demi-soloists, all girls, and a corps of eight, ditto. Everyone gets a moment in which to impress us, and the costumes, by Barbara Matera, look expensive. There is also an element of homage. In Balanchine's "Mozartiana," the women wear black or white-over-black tutus. Here the corps is in black velvet, with the four demis in graphite and the soloists in dove gray. (The corps has the best of the deal; the cut of the bodices makes the other dancers look thick-waisted.) The courtly style and symmetrical construction recall Balanchine, while the Nichols-Lüders pas de deux is dressed by Heather Watts and lit by Márk Stanley as if to suggest Jerome Robbins' "In the Night."

In short, the two new ballets, which are being shown together, make up a charming intramural spectacle. But aren't they a bit more déjà vu than absolutely necessary? Hasn't Peter Martins already given us that Mozart ballet in "Les Petits Riens," and with some of the same dancers? And isn't "Beethoven Romance" just another of the little showcases with which Martins both fulfills and evades the task of creating for ballerinas of rank? It's not that I don't admire the work Martins has done here; it's that I think I'm beginning to see in it a desperation and a desire to please that could jeopardize any really good work he might do in the future. He has lapsed into formula



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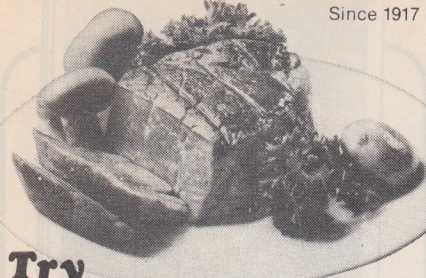
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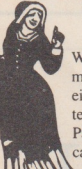
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—Matthew Arnold

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composing, defined by areas of need: Stars, Soloists, Kids. Under Balanchine, he made ballets on assignment. Now that he can, in theory at least, do anything he likes, he seems to enjoy himself less.

It was interesting to see, on a Saturday matinée, the two new pieces together with "The Waltz Project," which was the best work that Martins did, or anybody did, on the company for last season's American Music Festival. Something happens right away in "The Waltz Project" which doesn't happen in either of Martins' Mozart ballets or in "Beethoven Romance," and that is a sense of excitement and intimacy between the dancers. And it keeps on happening, even though the piece is too long, repeats its effects, and at the end overplays its hand. You watch every minute of it, and, whether you're amused, awed, exasperated, or repelled, you're held by it. I imagine this is because Martins really wanted to make it, or got caught up in it as he was making it.

There might be another reason for the peculiar liveliness of "The Waltz Project"—its material is congenial. Martins, one of the great classical dancers of our time, has become a choreographer fluent in the rhetoric of classicism. But so far he hasn't proved himself a true believer. He seems to harbor mental reservations about the modernity and relevance of classicism; to him classical might almost be the opposite of modern. Especially when it comes to relations between the sexes, Martins seems to see the "classical" world as harmonious and dull and the "modern" world as challenging, dissonant, and alive. "The Waltz Project" picks up certain impulses from his very first piece, "Calcium Light Night," and rides with them. His comfort is palpable. I even think his ear is better than it is in the two new pieces. Also, it's a Soloist Ballet, which means he can relax a little—he doesn't have to worry about accommodating stars. A curious fact is that though Martins has presented and re-presented the company's young dancers in his classical pieces, he hasn't succeeded in making any of them stars, whereas Heather Watts and Jock Soto were established in major roles in Martins' Stravinsky ballets. Now it is Helene Alexopoulos, implacably lyrical in "The Waltz Project," who is on her way.

—ARLENE CROCE

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