

The Middle of the Journey

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

TO THE FAT-CHEEKED youths trying out for Fresh Tracks at Dance Theater Workshop, it might seem that choreographers such as Bebe Miller and Marta Renzi, who have been showing work steadily, in good places, for over 10 years, have made it—"it" being the far side of a hump that it would be hard to slide back over. Indeed, these artists *have* passed a test: people who don't know them personally will come to see their dances. There are other bits of good news as well. Miller, for example, says that she now feels she can afford to make mistakes in her work: "I'm not going to be dropped if I mess up, or not right away." But what these supposedly established choreographers don't feel is any firm sense of being established—any confidence that they can just go on doing what they're doing and not worry about being better or more or other than they are. Miller has received two Bessie awards, but "I say to myself, 'How come we're not in Europe six weeks a year?'" Stephen Petronio, another "established" one, just got back from eight weeks in Europe; he's probably wondering when he's going to get his second Bessie award. (He got one in 1986.) As Gertrude Stein said of something altogether different (my hometown, Oakland), "When you get there, there's no there there."

Part of what's not there is money. "Can you go out to dinner?" I ask Miller. (This is my one-step choreographer-prosperity test.) "Yes," she says. Pause. "To an Indian restaurant." She just bought herself a color TV and a VCR with a credit card, but she is tired of living meagerly. Tim Buckley, this year, after 10 years in New York, managed to get an apartment of his own. The reason is that he has disbanded his company and now makes a living. He works in the costume department at the New York Shakespeare Festival, making hats and armor. Marta Renzi is skeptical of the mere logic of demanding a decent living from dancing. "This deal of dancers saying, 'It's a job—I want to be paid for it.' I understand what they mean, but it's not something I would ever say. If I had, I wouldn't be dancing."

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DONA ANN MCADAMS

Bebe Miller

There are also, Buckley feels, considerable psychological and philosophical problems in having a company. What begins in fun and friendship becomes something else very fast. "When you have a group of people together, there are other questions between you besides who's dancing what part. And for some people I think that's the real attraction. But then if you decide to go off, and not have the company, you are doing something very serious. You are breaking up a group. You can't do that to people, pull them apart in that way. It's traumatic—something people go on feeling for a long time. Also, there's come to rely on you. If the group

more hours you need in order to avoid just redoing the last thing you succeeded at. "The muscles have a memory. When you do something that goes over well, they take you back there."

In other words, everything aims at keeping everything the same, and if that's not what you want, you're in trouble. Buckley: "I wasn't interested in having this group of dancers who have these 10 great pieces and dance them for 10 years and do them on PBS." For this reason, together with an injury, he dissolved his company in 1985. "I wanted to continue to develop, and that meant doing other kinds of things."

But even those, like Renzi, who use a pick-up company rather than a permanent group, find themselves being dragged into the future. If it's not a company that's perpetuating itself in your name, it's a career. For example, National Endowment on the Arts and New York State Council on the Arts company grants require you to describe, a year in advance, the dances you're planning to make. Renzi has decided that she will no longer apply for these grants. "It just didn't make sense for me to say that I knew what I was doing that far ahead of time. Because I didn't." Renzi also questions the necessity of always making new work. After her last New York season, she took the dancers out on tour with no new pieces, just repertory: "Repertory is certainly cost-effective. And if all the dancers stay healthy and you don't hate each other, you don't have to recast or rehearse."

Finally, there are the teleological anxieties, the problem of being on the middle of the ladder, or perceiving it thus. Those

are absorbed in what you are making, not to want to show it more widely, particularly if others are doing so, and succeeding. And, as Renzi adds, "Maybe that's honorable, to say, 'I want to put myself to the test.'" At DTW she would feel, "this is all very well, within the family," but what about outside? Likewise, Miller says, "I'm past the point of being produced by P.S. 122 and DTW, but"—and here's the rub—"I'm not at the point where I can go anywhere and expect



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But it's not just that there is something missing, like a comfortable life. It's that suddenly there is something there, and that is the company. The more you talk to these choreographers, the larger this thing looms. On the one hand, it's a group of people who are there to do the choreographer's dances. On the other hand, it's a thing, a power, a furnace, a lime pit. It's a monster, and every day you have to find a fresh virgin to feed it. To begin with, you have to pay the dancers—a job that none of these people felt they were doing well. Miller's dancers still work as janitors, typists, body-building coaches. Petronio's got cooks, waitresses, an accountant. You get to pay them a bit; then they go on unemployment. Buckley minces no words: "It's just a question of how long you can go on exploiting people without hurting them too much."



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So you keep the group going. You feed it money. (Fundraising, says Buckley, is 50 to 80 per cent of having a group.) And you feed it new dances, because that's what it needs in order to put on its next season. "The way the system is set up, you have to create work faster than is good for you," Buckley claims, and everyone agrees on this point. Nor, paradoxically, is it easy to make good work when you're the head of a group. "A dance company is a hole that you keep throwing hours into," says Petronio. At the same time, the more success you have, the

more hours you need in order to avoid just redoing the last thing you succeeded at. "The muscles have a memory. When you do something that goes over well, they take you back there."

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Finally, there are the teleological anxieties, the problem of being on the middle of the ladder, or perceiving it thus. Those kids at the Fresh Tracks tryouts know what they're aiming for: a season at DTW—or P.S. 122 or the Kitchen or Danspace or La Mama. But what do you do when, like Bebe Miller, you've already been at DTW five times? I remember, once, putting this question to David White, the director of DTW. He answered that the dance world was plagued by stepping-stoneism and that it should learn to think otherwise. Much great work, he said, *belonged* in small theaters; that was the size of its natural audience. Only minds benumbed by the American economy insisted that whatever was good must therefore get bigger.

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are absorbed in what you are making, not to want to show it more widely, particularly if others are doing so, and succeeding. And, as Renzi adds, "Maybe that's honorable, to say, 'I want to put myself to the test.'" At DTW she would feel, "this is all very well, within the family," but what about outside? Likewise, Miller says, "I'm past the point of being produced by P.S. 122 and DTW, but"—and here's the rub—"I'm not at the point where I can go anywhere and expect



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bookings." Her eye is on a self-produced season at Marymount Manhattan Theater. Other middle-level choices are the Joyce (Renzi's last New York season was there) and the Triplex, though none of these theaters has an organic audience of the kind that DTW has. In truth, everyone's eye is on the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with its big auditoriums and big counterculture glamour. "There's nothing like BAM," says Miller. And what lies between DTW and BAM is in some sense just a big between. The psychology is maddening, for overhyped BAM seasons have damaged many an artist—and even if one does okay, what comes after BAM? Is one assumed into heaven?—but again, such thoughts are hard to avoid. "I'm very nervous about what happens next,"

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Miller admits. As for Renzi, when I asked her if she ever felt like quitting, she broke into peals of grim laughter.

How one holds up under these strains depends on a number of factors, one being the question of whether there's anything you want in life besides making dances. Renzi got married, moved to Nyack, and had a baby, all of which militated against the kind of obsessive concentration that the Career usually requires. "When I was 25, I saw a choreographer who was 45 picking through some vegetables in the East Village. She was trying to get a bargain. I said, 'I'll never do that.' But I would have, if I hadn't gotten married."

Temperament is, of course, another critical factor. Buckley's story is unusual in that he has an unusually reflective mind. His dances, as he explains them, were almost conceptual. He was not so much interested in making steps to music. ("The steps came out so fast that I



Marta Renzi

LOIS GREENFIELD

had to have Rocky [Bornstein] and Thom [Fogarty] stand behind me and pick them up, because I was right away onto something else.") He was interested in performance as an idea, a *Ding an sich*. One of the last pieces he made, and the one he liked best, *Proximology*, took dance itself as its subject: it was about a concert that wasn't coming together, but falling apart. Likewise, a video piece that he is beginning to work on now, with John Sanborn, is about not dancing, or stopping dancing.

Miller is less troubled philosophically. She is both ambitious and, of those I spoke to, the most serene. Renzi had survived a lot of doubts; she is witty and candid. Petronio is on a roll, and having a good time. Unlike the others, he seems to have a natural head for business. "Can you go out to dinner?" I ask. "Oh, yeah," he says, "no problem." "Good," say I, weary of interviewing choreographers, "you can take me to dinner." "First I have to see the article," he says. ■

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