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Weird and Wonderful Moves

Ballett Frankfurt

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It is tempting to speculate why the city of Frankfurt has decided now that it needs a classical ballet company in its opera house, and has expelled William Forsythe's enormously influential "hyperballet" company after decades in which

that company put Frankfurt on the international cultural map. Is Wuppertal likely to put Pina Bausch on the street?

These things are always over-determined, and there are doubtless fiscal and political reasons, a councilman who's gained the upper hand, a composer's wife who wields enormous influence behind the scenes, and so on.

But it may be that the Apocalyptic vision, which so many of Forsythe's ballets seemed to embody, has lost its status as the metaphor of "the way it is" (or "the way it's going to be"). Several of his ballets used his new images of how the body can be configured to limn, to a point of visionary, prophetic status the look of androids stalking over a waste land or practicing dark rituals on moonless nights (the devo ballets with the industrial scores: I'm thinking of *Artifact 2*, *New Sleep*, *in the middle*, *somewhat elevated*, ballets like that).

Forsythe is just as brainy and curious about what the body can do as he ever was, and we saw many weird and wonderful moves last week-end. But, one is tempted to ask, is there a post-Apocalyptic application of the findings of such movement research? The stuff we saw last week-end looked happily anarchic, but inconsequential, like an evening at Judson

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Church.

An elbow may bend at the side, sending its hand across the back and then slithering up the spine between the shoulder-blades; that shoulder begins to dip sideways while simultaneously the opposite hip begins a circle backwards that turns into a full-body swivel en dehors. This kind of slinky move, complex, involving many axes, is contrary to the magnificent simplicities of classical ballet but very typical of the "hyperballet" of William Forsythe—actually I've made it up myself, but it is the sort of thing that the Frankfurt Ballett were doing the other night, all night. It's like "Jabberwocky" made up of nothing but words like brillig and slithy, with equally mimsy syntax.

The move nobody will forget, I hasten to add, was the moment in the first piece when a blonde wearing cherry-red shorts, a white tank top, and pointe shoes began getting up from all fours by pushing forward onto her pointes, which were bent almost double, curving like a hawk's talons, and from there somehow stood up on pointe. The transition was electrifying, the whole audience gasped, especially the bun-heads in the house, for she had gone somehow from infantile to adult stature as if it were nothing.

The whole evening seemed a happy display of lots of movement research. It was a cheerful, "what me worry?" sort of farewell tour. Even the last piece—the notorious table ballet (*One Flat Thing Reproduced*), which looks like a really bad day in special ed class—was by Forsythe standards only moderately disturbing, and the invention, the brainy discoveries, the "look what I can do" feats of twisting and lunging and piking and isolation never flagged. *One Flat Thing* is a based on a resonant theatrical trope: it is an obstacle course. Ancestors include Little Eva's struggle across the ice-floes in the famous melodrama Uncle Tom's Cabin, countless Escape movies. But it's also clearly a metaphor for the company's predicament (up against bureaucratic obstacles on all sides). It also speaks to everyone caught in some kind of grid-lock these days.

As the curtain goes up, the dancers shove a dozen general-issue classroom tables into the middle of the space, as close to each other (it feels like) as ice-cubes in a gin-and-tonic—over and around which the dancers then try to move at top speed. The basic moves are the kind gymnasts do on "the horse": i.e. grabbing the table with their hands and lifting their legs up between their arms (to get onto the table), scrambling across it, and repeating. It put me in mind of the way I felt in my dreams after the Twin Towers were bombed, that I was struggling to get out of some space where I could not see what I was doing and things were totally in my way—things that had consciousness and things that did not.

The piece kept developing a tension between accomplishing a task at all costs, and helping someone else to do it—it was fascinating to see oscillations of compassion and desperation, moments that looked like Café Muller, moments where the sheer gymnastic genius of a dancer would allow him to spring onto a table as gracefully as a cat, periods of intensely compacted activity, and others of relative calm—all the while an unnerving racket came at us that sounded like gunfire in the neighborhood.

That was pretty heavy, but the energy was so high, the dancers were so engaging, the skill-levels so extraordinary, the invention so interesting, it remained on the whole an exhilarating piece. And the rest of the show had been much the same, and even more agreeable—especially in the incidental detail. (Forsythe's choreography is hyper-inflected—the structure is hard to make out, the detail swarms all over it.) Sometimes it was funny, e.g., when a man kept dropping one hand into the other as if he wasn't sure what this was. It sometimes felt like when a baby discovers one of its feet and starts putting it into its mouth, or curls its toes to see what they'll do; I had several flashes on Harpo Marx, as when he'd pick up Chico's knee and start cutting his tie in half. Not exactly that, but it FELT like that—deliriously wacky. But it may only mean that I'd zoned out for a while and just come back when the timing got zany.



The section between the intermissions was especially fine—a sensuous and beautiful duet, danced mostly in unison, for two women in exquisite simple costumes: a sort of long-sleeved black leotard that was sheer above the waist, so their lovely breasts were on view, and opaque black below. The legs were bare, and the soft shoes were pink satin. (These were the only "costumes" all night—for the rest, the dancers wore practice clothes, drippy jersey things or track suits or shorts, probably because there was no budget for "décor"). This piece was the only one where I ever noticed a ballet position—*effacé devant*, in particular, would appear every now and then like a rainbow on a transitional

day, simply glorious.

It was followed by a quartet for guys who could not figure out what to do with their hands. It felt very Judson Church, so geeky, so funny, occasionally so long phrase that would build extraordinary momentum, with lots of turns and come to rest as one man fell back onto another who'd just arrived in the nick of time to support him there.

I have always liked Forsythe's ballets* and am hopeful that a new situation will be found for him in Frankfurt, and that we'll get to see both his new company dance his work, and his classic pieces as danced by the Paris Opera, San Francisco, Pacific Northwest, New York City, and Joffrey Ballets in particular, and other companies whose names I do not know. They are challenging for the dancers, and they present visions of the way we live now that we need to own up to.

* CF the Danceview Writer's Archive, which holds [two reviews](#) of the "devo" Forsythe ballets performed in the Bay Area around 1990.

Photos:

First: Ander Zabala, Georg Reischl, Cyril Baldy and Amancio Gonzalez of Ballet Frankfurt perform in *(N.N.N.N.)*. Photo: Joris-Jan Bos

Second: Jill Johnson and Regina van Berkel perform in *Duo*. Photo: Dominik Mentzos

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