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#0, Ballett Frankfurt, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, June 4, 2004

Posted by Renee Renouf Hall on 06-06-04 at 07:45 PM

Program: The Room As It Was; Duo; (N.N.N.N.); One Flat Thing, reproduced

These four works credited not only William Forsythe as choreographer but Thom Williams as composer. One ballet veteran remarked, 'Oh, yes, he must have choreographed the grunts and puffs of the dancers.' Indeed, the June 1 San Francisco Chronicle article refers to at least one dance possessing "a breath score," its incidental music insinuating itself, then receding.

Cal Performances' program listed 32 dancers, two claiming Northern California as formative heath: Jody Gates from Sacramento, formerly Joffrey and Pennsylvania Ballets, joined Ballett Frankfurt in 2000; Nathalie Thomas, raised in Santa Cruz, who danced with NDT II and the Komische Oper, joining Ballett Frankfurt in 2001. We saw only Nathalie Thomas, about whom more to come.

I found the Forsythe's s credit notes a bit strange; acknowledging only training at the Joffrey School but not two years with the Joffrey Company, 1971-73, when he is likely to have been exposed to Twyla Tharp who mounted Deuce Coupe and As Time Goes By in 1973. The notes further carefully eschew mention of Forsythe's commissioned work for San Francisco Ballet where one of SFB's dancers, Tracy Kai-Meier, became both muse and later his wife until her untimely death to cancer. Dancer Dana Caspersen, ignored any SF connection in the program notes for which she is credited. It would have been nice to know when each of the pieces were created, identifying any choreographic progression. It took the press packet, not available to the audience who also may not have read the San Francisco Chronicle, to determine 2002 was the creation year for The Room As It Was and (N.N.N.N.), while Duo was created in 1996 and One Flat Thing, Reproduced was born in 2000. With the exception of the ensemble numbers costumed by Steven Galloway, Forsythe masterminded costumes, lighting and staging.

My overall reaction is that Forsythe owes a considerable debt to Tharp, the emergence of contact improvisation, the flight of swallows and the intricate exploration of isolation movement. The results seem a plethora of problem solving – 'Let's see: we add these props, set them up this way, assign dancers coming forward in intervals in this particular area and see what they do.'

The Room As It Was with a cast of eight (four women, four men) in vaguely delineated spatial areas, with a multitude of rapid fire adjustments when the individual dancers came into contact with each other. The contact improvisation element was reinforced with an assiduous array of casual costumes, and the juxtaposition of contact qualities with the four women in pointe shoes.

Slender Jone San Martin appeared the hesitant outsider, gentle, introverted, carried in spots and utilized as prop by Dana Caspersen, a rounded, small blonde dancer, possessed with highly articulate ankles and extravagantly arched pointes. In other contexts she would be a spiritual descendant to the pint-sized dynamos of the Russian Imperial Ballet, Mathilde Kshessinska and Olga Preobrajenska. Caspersen and Richard Siegal were both given the small, darting punctuated movement possible only in small, slender and well articulated bodies, bird-like explorations of ankles, reaches, responses, and torso angles and undulations.. Stephen Calloway, easily the tallest male in the company, was assigned articulated grunts, straight thrusts of the arms, covering territory; at

various times, he hoisted or supported women dancers in a passing acknowledgment or rudimentary referral to the excitement of a pas de deux. Francesca Caroti scurried around, an echo of an extremely energetic, busy housewife, her assignment carefully cleansed of any references of domesticity.

After Intermission we saw Duo and (N.N.N.N.), a quartet for men. Duo was danced by Jill Johnson and Natalie Thomas, both remarkably well matched in height, length of leg and quality of movement. Duo was the closest work in the program to classical exposition, danced in front of the curtain on the apron, where bends are not really contortions and twists owe something to Yoga. Occasionally the dancers were asked to assume a classical attitude or developpe; here Thomas demonstrated a lustrous classical technique, doubtless refined by exposure to Ballet Mistress Barbara Vass at the Comische Opera. Thomas hit textbook accuracy every time while Jill Johnson's positions veered just slightly to the expressionistic, making one want to see her in an Anthony Tudor work.

(N.N.N.N.) is described as a mind in four parts; if so, what a corpus collusum! Of the four works it summarizes best Forsythe's comment "It has to work viscerally," with dancers Cyril Baldy, Amancio Gonzales, George Reischl and Ander Zabala. From moments of calm and almost stillness, there is a wonderful male glee in horsing around, pushing, shoving, improvising with arms, hands, positions and timing. As with the others, one can relish the split-second transitions of the dancers, plus applaud Forsythe for selecting dancers whose bodies don't fit the mold of Balanchine-influenced classical proportions.

One Flat Thing, reproduced employed a series of aluminum-toned metal tables moved horizontally to stage front, allowing small spaces for corridors and avenues between. He asked his dancers, from miniature Yoko Ando to Steven Calloway, to maneuver through, around and on top of this constriction, which possessed all the charm of government issue underwear. What ensued was a dictionary of scramble, dash, hunt and find techniques until the ensemble pushed the tables to the back of the stage in an abrupt blaze of energy.

Forsythe without question, captures and conveys in dance the current uncertain ambience in Western civilization, moving beyond the initial influences I previously mentioned. Arriving open-minded, with exposure to In The Middle, somewhat elevated, I registered the dancers' virtuosity and the choreographic complexity, feeling little more than intellectual admiration. Around me, two extremes were demonstrated; some dancers, exposed to the isolation cum classical technique in Alonzo King's works, left the auditorium, while other members stood in ecstatic ovation. These opposites must reflect the controversy which led to Ballett Frankfurt's forthcoming demise, and the formation of an ensemble half the current size which will shuttle between Frankfurt and Dresden as well as tour. I can see why some audiences want a respite, a refuge to the merciless reality of angst. I confess I do also.

I forgot to mention: the swallow reference refers to an arm swinging motion when the dancers start a new movement passage.