

Surviving Today

Programming Kevin O'Day's new Diamond Project ballet *Open Strings* with Jerome Robbins's *Interplay* and A Suite of Dances and George Balanchine's *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* throws the cold, desolate vigor of the 1990s into clear relief. These ballets, however dissimilar, are all contemporary in mood and tone; they inbutton classicism—borrowing the wing, the easy manners, the slice of a turned-in leg from jazz. *Interplay*, with its Morton Gould score, premiered in 1945, a little less than a month after Germany surrendered, and presents a sunny image of American youth: its eight performers are vigorous, yet innately elegant in their dancing; impudent, yet bonded with one another.

Robbins's *Suite*, though made for Mikhail Baryshnikov only three years ago, has *Interplay*'s sweet easy humor without the literal "behavior." The solo's about a man fooling brilliantly around to Bach with a live cellist as companion (certain of the subtler stylistic points elude Damian Woetzel, but he's magnificent in the work, as is cellist Wendy Sutter). Here's a person so happy, so inventive in his dancing, that it becomes a world for us too.

Balanchine always created worlds. His miraculously apt conjunction of music and dancing engenders images of behavior, of shared customs, of elusive meanings. The simple fact that in *Violin Concerto* each of the four principals first appears leading four dancers of the opposite sex (and then reappears with four of the same sex) sets a tone. You imagine athletes prancing onto the field, warming up for some game that appears, startlingly, in the form of two contrasting duets, both profound.

O'Day's ballet tells a different story, or nonstory. Mark Stanley's superb lighting draws a rectangle on the floor, slowly lifts a black curtain to reveal a lemon-yellow cyc, stuns our eyes by going from a cruel brightness to near total blackness except for one figure isolated in a follow spot. (The shadow of William Forsythe looms.) The effects cry drama, but appear principally for their own beauty. John King's discordant music for electric and bass guitars veers from savage jangling to silences to a distant shivering reminiscent of wind chimes. It's not music that leads you along a path; you're in a dark room, and it hits you here and there. Stacey Calvert, Arthur Evans, Nilas Martins, Alexander Ritter, and Wendy Whelan wear leotards cleverly designed by ex-NYCB dancer Carole Divet to look like turquoise tank tops and dark green briefs. They begin on their backs, lined up, and return at the end to the same position. The whole ballet, in fact, makes a point of returning to beginnings. A duet for Evans and Calvert

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In Memoriam:
Bessie Schönberg

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

seems to rewind itself more than once.

The style is muscular classicism with a modern bite to it, occasionally pitted by a cryptic gesture like pretending to use binoculars. Everything

ger, looser blacks. Their quizzical grins assess his polite introductory hand-shake. Does he want to be cool? You bet your ass. But there's a load of irony in *Appropriate Behavior* and a sweet story that blasts racial stereotypes. And David Neumann is a mean man with hip-hop moves. Too fast for the eye to hold and yet precise in fluidity, his lean body rearranges itself in countless suave attitudes. Forget joints; he bends everywhere.

Appropriate Behavior was made in collaboration with fabulous club dancers Archie Burnett and Brahm (Bravo) LaFortune. The suspicious

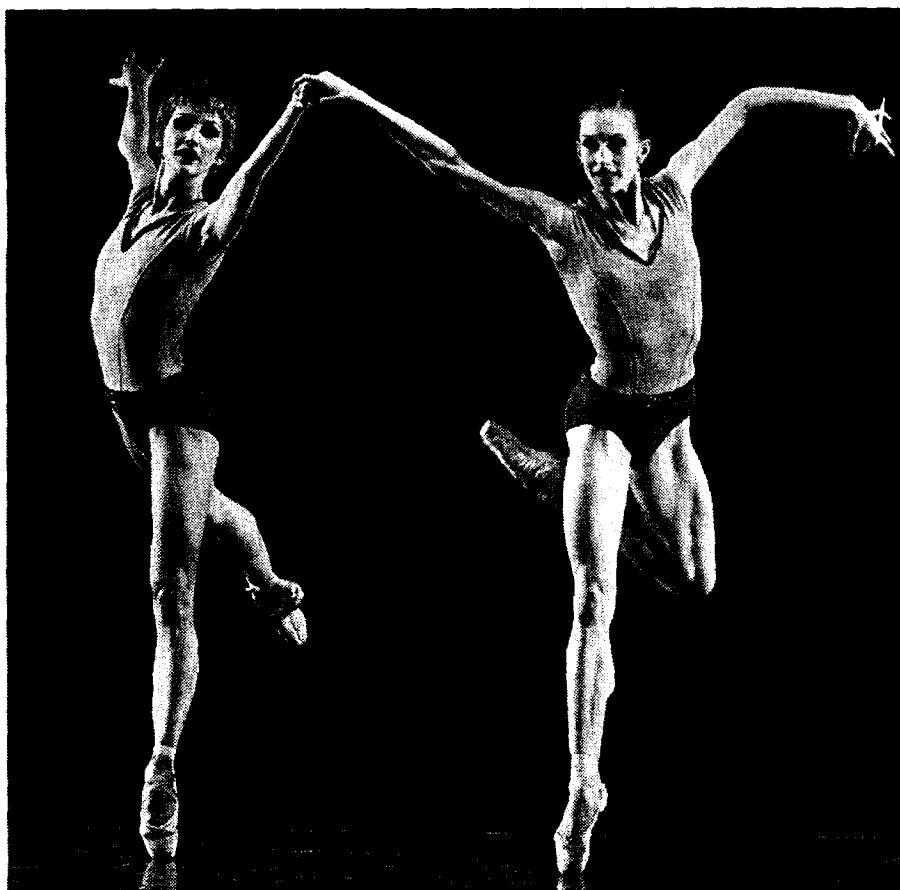
some cereal. Lurches off to find some. Staggers back. Box empty. Much later, after some misadventures that include watching cereal boxes walk, he dumps a whole box of Shredded Wheat biscuits into his bowl. They look like turds.

Neumann uses the off-kilter moves of hip-hop, as well as the suggestion of missed connections or a machine gone awry, to bring out oddities in contemporary life. *Adirondack* is, you gradually realize, a hockey game. Except that nothing's straightforward. One of the players (John Heginbotham) wears a pink satin skirt, and his color-coordinated partner Adrienne Truscott keeps hauling him to the bench. Players hold up fingers, pinch one another, or make dodgy, unfinished moves, eyeing everybody suspiciously; Nami Yamamoto races over to tall, skinny Matthew Heyner, hoists him straight up, and holds him there a while. Upside-down flowering plants, some of them alarmingly large, overhang the scene. Announcer Robert Cucuzza is frequently overcome by shyness or Clare Byrne's caresses. Anyway, the "game" is never exactly in sync with him or the taped commentator or the soupy music. By the end, everyone's going for the throat—it's a wonder they (including Fritha Pengelly, Krista Miller, and Gregory M. Catellier) can still move.

Neumann named his concert for Doris Humphrey's dictum, "Don't Just Do Something, Stand There." He could stand learning another: "All dances are too long." When he does, he'll prosper.

None of the hundreds, maybe thousands, who loved Bessie Schönberg were prepared for her death. Who remembered she was 90? She'd planned the usual full summer—teaching her famed composition course at Jacob's Pillow and The Yard, advising choreographers for Dancing in the Streets's Wave Hill concerts. She'd just finished vetting pieces in a workshop at NYU, startling two drummers by urging them to "go hell-bent for leather!" (German-born, Bessie had an original approach to English slang.)

The dance community profited by the knee injury that knocked Bessie (few called her Miss Schönberg, or Mrs. Varley) from Martha Graham's company in 1931. At Bennington College, at Sarah Lawrence (whose Dance Department she chaired until 1975), at Dance Theater of Harlem, Juilliard, and countless other places, she incited choreographers to be daring. There were no formulas; she helped them to see what a dance was trying to become and to cast aside, ruthlessly, other considerations. At a celebration held in her honor at Sarah Lawrence a few years ago, I suggested that a verb "to Bessie" might one day enter the vocabulary—as in "They rejected my proposal, but Joe Bessied it with me, and it went through." Whenever I saw her she Bessied my spirit, making me see things sharper and truer, May her spirit live in all of us.



Beautiful but cruel: Stacey Calvert and Wendy Whelan in *Open Strings*

is marvelously danced, tidily structured. O'Day, who's maturing rapidly as a choreographer, plays with the symmetry of one group advancing while another retreats, then breaks the balance by having two women leap into men's arms, leaving the third man temporarily on his own. I find myself drawn to odd moments that suggest interesting human relations: the women push Evans toward the wings, then he drags them off; Martins begins his pas de deux with Whelan by subtly wrestling her into holds we know are duck soup to both of them. But moments like this don't develop; they're just interesting tidbits. Compared with the fine duet O'Day made for the American Repertory Ballet, *Open Strings* is chill. Everything about the production bespeaks a hard, beautiful, goalless force in space, marking trails that lead only back to a dubious home base. The '90s in a nutshell.

The setup oozes clichés of racial snobbery: a skinny little white guy stands between two big-

black guys, the overeager white one—that was a ruse. The premise is that the three are buddies-in-dance, kids whose moms push homework in vain. Now Burnett plays Neumann's mother ("Stop doing the Robot while I'm talking to you!"); now Neumann slips into a Haitian accent to bawl out Burnett. LaFortune rolls his eyes: his daddy makes him dance. The "boys" practice, eyes on the TV, or become mirrors for one another, having so much fun that they're irresistible. Black? White? These men borrowed, stole, and own this dancing (deep-down sources range from Ashanti to Astaire). And, of course, they show their skill: LaFortune doing speed-of-light salsa using a friend's immobile arms to spin under and snake around; Burnett flashing his hands and hips like knives and vogueing down some runway; all of them jamming until the roof about falls in.

In Neumann's opening antihero solo, *Dose*, before he puts on a hat and breaks into dancing, he can't get his limbs to work in concert. Gazes endlessly at a TV in a cereal box. Wants

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Hip-Hop Rising

Rennie Harris/PureMovement and Crisha Coleman's Hot Mouth shared a program—a study in contrasts—at a conference of the International Association of Blacks in Dance in Philadelphia two years ago. Harris's company—his crew of young brothers—avenged fallen comrades with brash stories of thug life told in hip-hop dance; Coleman and Hot Mouth, self-toasted "Bad Ass Masters of Vocalogy," served pungent vocal satire and intellectual sound games. Despite differences, that show jammed, and a mutual attraction led to funding from the Rockefeller Foundation for an evening-length collaboration. The artists reveal the juicy fruits of their union at Harlem's Aaron Davis Hall Friday through Sunday.

The partnership began with both companies on tour, meaning intermittent meetings and large phone bills. Coleman, an alumna of Urban Bush Women, went into the studio to lay down tracks; her singing got the hip-hop treatment from mixmaster Darrin Ross. Last month the two ensembles met to work it out body to body. Says Coleman, "Some of the men in Rennie's company came up in the clubs and have been propelled by very loud music—with the decibels vibrating the body. It was a challenge to see if I couldn't turn that inside out and get to the breath the body makes when it's working, and make that the music for the dance."

The new work premiered in Philly earlier this month; word on the street says this shit rocks steady, revealing more than the usual Broadway-styled recycling of hip-hop hardness. Harris says, "Anybody in hip hop can be aggressive and tell a rough story—rage is the easiest emotion to express." Coleman concurs. "This project is about cracking open the egg of hip hop—showing some of its internal thought processes and subtleties, something beyond the virtuosity and showmanship of the body. The agenda is to explore hip hop as an art form in all its true complexity." Bet.

—THOMAS DEFRAZ