

# Big Time

Lar Lubovitch's *Othello* for ABT is a ballet with a conscience. The dancing doesn't build toward climaxes or pause for applause; the choreographer wants the action to rush onward. He also wants to show that women in 16th-century Venice were chattel, victims of male lust for power. But turning Shakespeare's play into a three-act ballet is an overwhelming task. The play has little action, few pretexts for dancing; it's a string of two-person dialogues. As Lubovitch ironically pointed out in an interview, critics are bound to compare his ballet with José Limón's succinct quartet *The Moor's Pavane*. And, in fact, he succeeds brilliantly with duets that recall both the play and *Pavane*: Iago dripping poisoned words into Othello's ear, Iago manipulating Emilia, Othello furious and loving with Desdemona. The choreography of state-of-mind solos is inspired too: Othello convulsive, yanking his head from side to side like a caged tiger; Iago cracking his body into malevolent shapes.

Lubovitch has a variety of ideas to flesh out the plot. While Iago recites Desdemona's infidelities, we see Othello's vision of them, and Iago then mimes them with his agonized boss, giving jealousy a homoerotic shading. Dancers ebbing and flowing like waves become women waiting for their husbands to disembark when they join them in a raffish tarantella. The most annoying addition: five "Commedia Dancers," archly jazzy types as ubiquitous in act 1 as the jester in Soviet *Swan Lakes*.

Inevitably, Lubovitch traffics in psychological revisionism. Although it's reasonable to portray the scapegoat Cassio as madly in love with Desdemona, I question making her appear to reciprocate—rushing past Othello in Cassio's arms shortly after greeting her husband lovingly on his return from a successful campaign. "So a little infidelity merits death?" the choreographer seems to muse.

The choreography struggles with Elliot Goldenthal's rich, powerful, dissonant score, which recalls, at times, Prokofiev's ballets. But unlike Prokofiev, Goldenthal doesn't write *musique dansante*. The music neither supports the dancing nor intensifies its effect; it stirs up atmosphere, and often that atmosphere is less what is than what may occur. Like movie music (which Goldenthal has written very successfully), what we hear seems to be forever foreshadowing disaster.

Music that suggests a festering society with a storm in the offing smothers his bare whiff of a tarantella. The final duet, in which Othello kills Desdemona, stirs us—not just because of Lubovitch's sensitive inventions and the marvelous performing but because, finally, the music is *there*, bittersweet, hovering.

Casting Desmond Richardson in

*Othello*  
American Ballet Theater  
Metropolitan Opera House  
Through July 5

New York City Ballet  
New York State Theater  
Through June 29

Merce Cunningham's  
Sixty Years of Dancing  
Brooklyn Academy of Music  
May 19

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Desmond Richardson as Othello and Sandra Brown as his doomed bride in Lar Lubovitch's new ballet

the leading role was a brilliant idea, not simply because this former Ailey dancer is black (he shares the role with Keith Roberts, who isn't), but because he's a magnificent blend of nobility and tigerish heat, his line so exquisite that deviations from it wring your heart. Parrish Maynard's brilliant Iago is both slimy and razor sharp. Roberts plays Cassio as adolescent and slightly effusive. Desdemona (Sandra Brown) and Emilia (Martha Butler) present simpler characters—one all happy innocence, the other a mixture of kindness and need. George Tsypin's spectacular sliding panels of cracked glass turn the stage into an ice palace not always in sync with Wendall K. Harrington's slide projections. Ann Hould-Ward's costumes combine period elegance with some irritating symbolism in the form of crotch-baring dresses. Desdemona flaunts it in Venice, confusing traditionalists and feminists alike.

Martha Graham's great landscape-of-the-mind dances opened the stage to new possibilities. It could become a flexible place, transformable and transformative, instead of "The Forest" or "The Ballroom." Eras could intersect and memories dance with the rememberer. When Angelin Preljocaj delves into this concept in his

Diamond Project ballet for NYCB, the result, *La Stravaganza*, isn't a Jungian journey, but a delicate, disturbing science-fiction tale that hints at societal decay. The first and last image is of a man (Alexander Ritter), facing away from us, slowly straining in the grip of four companions. A girl (Emily Coates) enters and threads her way unseen through the group. At the end, she

the end she returns to watch "her" world mourn her.

I love the way Preljocaj makes the fine performers seem to be thinking, to be experiencing all that happens (I wish more of the dancier passages also emphasized their individuality). Dancers as sentient human beings. Common enough south of 23rd Street, rare above it.

The dance world honors Merce Cunningham too much to put flashy offerings or easy outs onstage during the benefit heralding his 60-year career. Garrison Keillor of *A Prairie Home Companion* plays host with wit, aplomb, and an admirable array of facts and could-be facts (including the news that Cunningham's mother was a Minnesotan). A wonderful intermittent collage assembled by Cunningham company videographer Elliot Caplan shows scenes from Cunningham's life in dance.

A few superb artists stand for the many whose vision of art was blown open by Cunningham and his colleague John Cage. Meredith Monk and Theo Bleckmann sing the remarkable hocketing passage from her *Facing North*, their voices flying across the space in a dialogue so intense that a melody accrues from alternating notes. Mikhail Baryshnikov elegantly performs Cunningham's solo from *Walkaround Time*. Half hidden by a transparent box (part of Jasper Johns's set after Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass*), he manages while running in place to take almost all his clothes off and put them on differently, without ever appearing undressed.

Choreographers create *pièces d'occasion* referring in some way to Cunningham. Trisha Brown's beautiful solo *For Merce* to Webern music is studded with more sudden thrusts and moments of life-filled stillness than usual, for all its fluid buoyancy. In an atypical "event," *Flash in the Pan*, Mark Morris's dancers abandon canons and unison dancing and kite about on separate vivid mysterious errands, buzzed by abrasive sounds Morris would probably never otherwise dance to, while he strides about with a stopwatch and BAM director Harvey Lichtenstein occasionally turns up to sit on a chair and stare penetratingly about. In the course of making (or not making) a remote do what it ought to vis-à-vis the video screen, Bill Irwin tosses off a splendidly zany attempt at Cunninghamdance; he affirms Merce's scrupulousness about time by ending exactly with the onscreen countdown.

And then Cunningham's company reminds us again of his greatness and theirs by rocking us out of our seats with a performance of *Sounddance*. The master himself comes out, not to bow, but—what else?—to dance. □

# DA NCE

## Homecomings

BAM hosted the boldest party in town late in May: the 20th anniversary of Dance-Africa. Twenty companies jammed, directed by Baba Chuck Davis; at the outdoor bazaar, the chic, dreadlocked crowd ate, shopped, and danced in the streets. Inside, each session began with the griot's ceremonial reading of names of artists who've passed on to the Ancestral Grounds (a list including show-business choreographer Michael Peters next to Mama Pearl Omuwale Primus and Nana Opape Yao Dinizulu) and a stately procession of the elders of African dance forms in America. From the first two rows they presided, showering deserved appreciation on the best dancers.

On Saturday night, Harlem's LaRocque Bey Dance Company, 45 performers strong, set it off, a tapper trading beats with a master drummer, followed by a seamless collage of high-energy dances arranged to bring the crowd up. We rose. P.A.K.A. (Passing Ancestral Knowledge Along) Dance Company traded in New Island Nation storytelling with call-and-response *Congo Day* and spooky *Petro*, a stiff-bodied possession dance offered to Haiti's god of fire. The Nile Ethiopian Ensemble offered *Condor Dance*, the handsome quartet creating illusions like pop locking in hard, ticking gestures of the neck and shoulders. Sabar Ak Ru Afriq rounded the evening with a story ballet based on a Senegambian healing ritual. Twelve "village children," resplendent in bright costumes, danced according to age groups and, like the audience, loved every moment.

Louis Johnson Dance Theatre Ensemble came home to Henry Street May 17 through 19, with veteran dancers and children in selections from the choreographer's distinguished résumé. Adrienne Armstrong and Aubrey Lynch II, formerly of Alley, and Lowell Smith and Charmaine Hunter, alums of DTH, danced alongside a tap-dancing troop of kids. Best of all: the dramatic poem "I Remember" performed in two distinct versions by Colette Hill and Broadway diva Vivian Reed. —THOMAS DEFRANTZ