

## DANCE

Make Yourself a Spectacle

# SHAPE-SHIFTING

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Behind a screen, a shadow Adam and Eve bite into a hanging apple and keep right on biting until they merge into a single undulating shape. A woman dances dreamily within an oversized hula hoop. Momix's Joyce season, through February 18, will undoubtedly draw crowds. This 20-year-old company's success is based not on choreographic depth but on ways of having fun with the body. Like *Pilobolus*, of which Momix director Moses Pendleton was a cofounder, Momix traffics in illusion, but also offers pieces akin to mild-mannered circus acts. Almost all the works are by Pendleton in collaboration with performers.

The program titled "Momix in Orbit" showcases only a few of the 14 dancers, mostly in solos, duets, and trios. Some of the images are entrancing. In *Orbit*, Nicole Loizides dances as if almost unaware of the gleaming circle that she keeps rotating around her by the subtlest of hip motions. In *Sputnik*, once three men have jammed long poles into the brass bowl occupied by a quasi-oriental divinity type (don't ask), the men and their partners set the bowl and its ballast turning like a bizarre merry-go-round, and fly on the poles in looping circles. It's fun for a while to watch Craig Berman in *Underwater Study #5* slide his feet far apart and then, without apparent effort, draw them smoothly together again. And the shadow play in *E.C.* is ingenious. Figures disappear or metamorphose comically in the crack between two screens. A squeaking child made of fingers slides down the crack into waiting hands; a "woman" with a thread-thin torso pokes at her ballooning hips.

Most of the dozen pieces play with a single idea, maybe developing it, maybe not. The musical selections rarely develop, and—whether New Age dreamy, or pounding out a rock beat—are simply faded out when an idea has been explored enough (or too much, depending on your taste). More interestingly, movements from various Vivaldi violin concertos accompany *Jonas and Latude*, one of the two pieces on the program hinting at human relationships (the other is a duet, *Tuu*, in which Pi Keohavong sort of wears Kori Darling for much of the time). In *Jonas*, Berman and Brian Simerson, in old-time prison stripes, frolic on their bunks in a comic camaraderie emphasized by sound effects cutting through the music. The sudden sad ending is utterly gratuitous, but this acrobatic Groucho-and-Harpo-in-lockup provides a daffy counterpoint to the self-preoccupied dreams of the other numbers.

» Ninety-seven years and a day after George Balanchine's birthday on January 22, 1904, Eliot Feld and the New York City Ballet celebrated with a spectacular pageant-cum-ritual. Feld brought to his new *Organon* themes that have engrossed him at his own Ballet Tech—dancers navigating various kinds of equipment, extreme repetition, severe counterpoint—and blew them up to stupendous proportions.

Elaine Chelton and Alan Moverman play some great Bach organ works on two small keyboards at the back of the stage. But the Walker Technical Company's "Virtual Organ



SUPER BOWL: MEMBERS OF MOMIX IN SPUTNIK

Controller" blasts the sound out of 116 speakers, placing us in a virtual cathedral. A huge white star of fabric rises up and out of sight, glowing in Allen Lee Hughes's beautiful lighting. While Damian Woetzel dances vibrantly, hordes of dancers (30 company members, 30 students from the School of American Ballet) gradually fill the State Theater's stage, etching straight lines and zigzags with simple steps. By the time the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor thunders out, the first squads to arrive have filled two bleachers at the back and are creating intriguing patterns by leaning in contrary directions (this bench-bound dancing is one of Feld's happiest inventions).

It becomes apparent that Woetzel is your average mythic hero undergoing ordeal and rebirth. Above the crowd, he enters a metal maze hanging on the back wall—first squirming through its narrow spaces and then, when the passageways enlarge, stepping boldly from bar to bar. Safely on the ground, stripped to a jock-strap, he moves not like a premier danseur but with the lolloping freedom of a child, his legs slightly spraddled. When the white star drops over him like a tent, he slowly twists, cocooning himself, then, in a resurrection coda, unwinds so it can soar up again.

Maria Kowroski and Charles Askegard move periodically through the crowd like a high-tech Adam and Eve. She grabs her leg, hoists it in front of her, and stays split while he carries her along a diagonal path, wheeling and turning her as they go. Feld has created

other arresting passages, notably a dance for a group of men, and some heady counterpoint with one group tilting on the bleachers and another gesturing in a clump while men carry women in high leaps.

The crowd's paths aren't as crystal clear in execution as they must be in order not to look like milling around. It's easy to see *Organon* as inflated, but I don't find it hollow. Feld's strange homage seems deeply felt—a minimalist extravaganza striving for soul.

» Cheng-Chieh Yu and Jeanine Durning are two of my favorite downtown dancers, and I was charmed by their inventive, even giddy use of props and narrative in their separate pieces on a shared Dancespace program in January.

It's hard not to giggle with pleasure when you realize that the semicircle of upright and fallen folding chairs in Yu's solo *My Father's Teeth in My Mother's Mouth* represents said teeth. And when Yu performs big, bold steps reminiscent of a Chinese peasant dance on one side of the "mouth" and moves more softly and sinuously on the other, she brings before us the parents who left her a lousy dental situation (we learn about it through a taped dialogue between her and her dentist). Besides dancing wonderfully in front of projected slides designed by Peter Melville, she does some engaging things with a metal container—shaking it like a maraca or spilling out white teeth like dice in a no-win game.

In *A Good Man Falls*, Durning plays with

the notion of celebrity. There's even a mirror ball. Steffany George and Andrea Johnston dance stylishly, if perplexingly, and play the roles of fans and interviewers. Durning first lumbers in wearing an astronaut's padded suit and helmet and responds to questions with heartfelt clichés, recalling how the stars once called out to her. But nighttime crickets segue to Judy Garland wishing on a star, and Durning, now in a slinky black dress (costumes by Naoka Nagata), dances against similar clichés in taped stage-door interviews. As the words in Robert Garland's sound design veer toward incoherence, the performers' movements become stiff and nervous. A countdown elicits neither rockets nor spotlights, only teeny flashlights twinkling in the dark. Some of the logic eludes me, but there's nothing equivocal about Durning's dynamite performing.

Durning and Yu's collaboration, *a tree plus a tree is a forest*, has the air of a *pièce d'occasion*, rewarding primarily in that it lets us look at these women a little longer. ▣

Launching a Transformation

## TWENTY YEARS IN

Abdel R. Salaam's consistent voice is hardcore African American griot. His latest work, *Rhythm Legacy: The Living Books*, opens 651 Art's "Black Dance: Tradition and Transformations" festival Thursday at the BAM Harvey Theater. The 45-minute opus traces music, rhythm, and dance from natural African environments to digital landscapes in the Americas. Expect to be awed by guest stilt-walkers, spoken-word artists, and live DJs, in addition to his 20-year-old troupe, Forces of Nature.

Salaam founded the 28-member company to teach audiences "the history, mythology, current events, and genius of the African American and African world cultures." Forces cooks a tasty blend of traditional and modern, in a holistic vision of man and woman as animal members of the natural kingdom. Now firmly mid-career, Salaam lets loose. "The marriage of art, culture, science, and academia becomes the epiphany of the creative process. All our ancient societies embraced a living spiritual, sociopolitical, aesthetic, and ethical marriage of all those elements in art."

Forces holds an enviable, open-ended studio lease with the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. This anniversary year, it pays props to generations of black dance artists including Louis Johnson, Dianne McIntyre, Rod Rodgers, and Marlies Yearby. For Salaam, this homage is very necessary: "Each generation has impacted and developed the next. We've fertilized our common environment by looking at each other. The challenge becomes, How do we pull our own voices from this matrix of ancient and contemporary sources?"

In rehearsal, he pushes his dancers to think out of the box. "We take the time to work on a particular thing—but not a jeté or a pirouette. This is about transforming and becoming zoomorphic rather than anthropomorphic." These Forces are too powerful to resist. —Thomas DeFrantz