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A Program That Honors Two Vital Mentors

Rioul Dance New York Performs 'Martha, May and Me'

By SIOBHAN BURKE FEB. 16, 2014

If you've managed to run your own dance company for 20 years, chances are you haven't made it alone. Pascal Rioul, the director of Rioul Dance New York, had some serious mentors as a young artist: May O'Donnell and Martha Graham, with whom he danced in the 1980s and '90s.

On Friday at the 92nd Street Y, Mr. Rioul extolled those women and their influence on him as he introduced "Martha, May and Me," a program that will debut officially at the Joyce Theater in June. The Y evening, a preview open to critics, included excerpts from O'Donnell's "Suspension" (1943) and Graham's "El Penitente" (1940), alongside two of Mr. Rioul's signature pieces. The juxtaposition had the intended effect: to underscore what he called "my roots in American modern dance."

O'Donnell (a celebrated Graham dancer in the 1930s) was ahead of her time with "Suspension," which stood out for its formal abstraction in a pre-Merce Cunningham era of modern dance concerned with storytelling. Today, it feels vintage. (Any chance of updating those stirrup unitards?) But its balance of flurried motion and protracted stillness, of symmetry and asymmetry, remains intriguing, as seven dancers resist gravity (springlike stag leaps) and give in to it (deep lunges that plummet with the piano chords in Ray Green's weighty score).

Mobilizing the entire stage — including a two-tiered platform in one corner, where Sara Seger, the most natural performer throughout Friday's program, relished O'Donnell's original role — the dancers seem to pull taut the space around them. Side-bending torsos and abrupt directional changes, backed by deliberate intention, recall Cunningham's technique, a reminder that he, too, started out with Graham.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Rioul said that his dancers have performed his "Wien," from 1995, "hundreds of thousands of times." Whether or not that's an exaggeration, they looked much more confident in this deconstruction of the Viennese waltz, which sends six bodies swirling, scrambling and flinging one another around in a generally clockwise direction to Ravel's bombastic "La Valse." The idea is that they represent a morally decaying society, which certainly comes across in their aggressive partnering, silent screams, clawing skirmishes and the periodic expulsion of one individual from the group. "Wien" is heavy-handed but skillfully structured. You can see why it has held up over two decades.

American modern dance, in its early years, wanted to be taken seriously, to distinguish itself from supposedly more frivolous traditions. The theatricality of Graham's work, in that context, is understandable. "El Penitente," a trio inspired by the self-punishing rites of the Penitentes of the American Southwest, has stirring potential. But Jere Hunt (as the Christ Figure), Michael S. Phillips (the Penitent) and Charis Haines (Mary as Virgin, Magdalen, Mother) are still settling into their roles.

Desperately emotive works, like Mr. Rioul's 2008 "Views of the Fleeting World," set to Bach's "Art of Fugue," somehow seem less at home in this century. Despite their pleasing musicality, the sections that closed the program, with titles like "Gathering Storm" and "Flowing River," could not have been fleeting enough.

A version of this review appears in print on February 17, 2014, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: A Program That Honors Two Vital Mentors.

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