RIOLUT moves ahead, but keeps a foot in the past

By Robert Johnson
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NEW YORK — While some contemporary choreographers rush headlong into the digital future, others hold back reluctantly, preferring to mythologize the pre-industrial past.

Choreographer Pascal Rioult, whose RIOLUT dance company opened Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, has it both ways. Alternating this season with "The Great Mass," his evening-long study of Mozart, Rioult offers an intriguing mixed bill that moves forward, but not without a lingering backward glance.

"Shadow Box," the first of two season premieres, arrives half-immersed in virtual reality. Animator Brian Clifford Beasley has collaborated with Rioult on this work, in which the dancers appear surrounded by ghostly reflections of themselves projected on three huge screens. The digital realm is a world of borderless shadows, where pixelated bodies come and go unexpectedly, and their flattened silhouettes spin like weather vanes.

This program opens, however, with "Harvest," which, as its title suggests, is one of those plain and folksy dances. Stopping to form tableaux that recall the paintings of Jean-François Millet, the dancers hew naively to the land, praying the Angelus, chopping and gleaning. Conformity is violently enforced, which does not detract from the beauty of fan-shaped groupings for the women. One couple takes a surprisingly literal roll in the hay, and traditional Irish fiddle tunes clothe this work with homespun sentiment.

Rioult is good at atmosphere. Although he is not interested in straightforward narrative, he creates definite settings — the country, the city, the future, the past — in which stories might be told. These suggestive locales are small-scale and contained. The wide-open horizons of his mentor, Martha Graham, are not for Rioult, who is content to putter in a choreographic garden where everything is orderly and neat.

In "Shadow Box," this solid choreographic structure extends into an ethereal dimension, with figures onstage reflected on-screen. The piece, set to excerpts from Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," is a kind of game, at times leaving audience members to guess where things fall on the scale of "realness." While some images are projected, others seem to be produced by dancers stationed behind the screens.

Beasley's technical wizardry offers its own reward, but Rioult adds an occasional note of wistfulness, as in the duet for Charis Haines and Brian Flynn, which is consummated only on-screen, as if it were a dream never to be realized. At times the animations seem to peer at their live counterparts. Are they simply curious, or do they envy the rounded volumes and the itchy flesh? Rioult gets a laugh, when in the gravityless digital world, an animation suddenly topples over.

A second premiere, "City," places the dancers before a drifting video background that offers a hawk's-eye view of skyscrapers. Here, the interest lies in the dancers' nervous movement quality and in abrupt, streetwise habits that bleed over into private moments when they find themselves alone in boxes of light, or when they latch onto one another. Only the floating camera seems at peace, which may explain the lure of digital fantasies.

Robert Johnson may be reached at rjohson@starledger.com.