

## Criticizing Dance: Follow the Heart or Mind?

by Susan Yung

[Last week's post](#) on Doug Varone's *Chapters from a Broken Novel* received a number of comments, with many reacting to the work's [negative review in \*The New York Times\*](#). In fact, as consistently praised as Varone's work is among informed acquaintances of mine—those working in the field as presenters, writers, dancers—his work has been largely ill-reviewed in the *Times*, if not (to quote Claudia La Rocco, the latest to take aim) “steamrolled,” making the critics sound like philistines and Varone like a talentless novice. Clearly his work has tremendous merit. So what's the deal? Is it as simple as listening to one's heart, versus one's mind?

Backing up a little, this raises some questions about reviewing modern dance—lyrical, form-oriented dance—that isn't necessarily post-modern, or conceptually based, or that is narrative or unironic. I'll admit that personally, it is far more difficult to write about this kind of modern dance, because it often isn't in opposition to something, whether it's the status quo, or ballet, or beauty, or the lack of health insurance. It's not exploring some new or indigenous form, like voguing or flamenco or tap. It is for the most part universally understood dance that largely stems from the love of movement, pure and simple, and often expresses something basic about the human condition, dark or light, or through simple narrative lines.

And, unlike ballet or flamenco, there isn't a standard technique against which to measure a performance. Apart from generational influences (Varone danced with Lar Lubovitch, for example, who just choreographed an amazing, gem-like production of Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*), each modern choreographer's work is *sui generis*. It lends itself to being experienced, rather than analyzed. Thus when asked to write about it, it can be problematic for the writer. You often wind up describing the choreographer's specific language, or the individual performers or production elements. It's not as juicy as writing about something bizarre or anarchic. It even raises the question, should it be reviewed along the traditional model of criticism from which the *Times* has descended—more the theater reviewing model, where power is concentrated in one outlet, and reviews are often positive or negative?

An alternative is for companies to essentially opt out of being reviewed by declining to offer press comps. The publication can always purchase tickets, but it's a way of sending a message to the 800 lb gorilla, at least until power is dissipated and distributed to online blogs and outlets, as is currently happening at an accelerating rate, and in the face of a *Times* paywall.

There is no simple answer, and this could be debated *ad infinitum*. Until then, a final salvo from my date for Varone, post-show: “Now I can die happy.” The heart speaks loud and clear.

### One Response to “Criticizing Dance: Follow the Heart or Mind?”

1. *ELF* says:

[March 24, 2011 at 3:52 pm](#)

Unfortunately, a review in the *Times* sells tickets. Luckily, bad review but beautiful picture sells almost as many. Perhaps the readers have come to learn the biases or limitations of each of the reviewers.