

April 22, 2008

Fast or Slow--As You Like It

Doug Varone and Dancers

“Lux,” “Home” and “Boats Are Leaving”

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

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by **Rita Felciano**

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San Francisco Performances closed its current season with a return visit from Doug Varone and Dancers. What a smart move that was! Two years ago, when the company made its first appearance in fifteen years, Varone was practically unknown in the Bay Area. Certain companies return year after year but Varone’s was never among them. Yet this is a choreographer whose work is rich beyond the way he uses music and movement. No matter the tenor of the times with its demands for experimentation for its own sake, Varone never let this get into the way of making formally cogent work about what it means to be human: conflicted, fragile, resilient. He may also be the most visible direct descendant of early modern dance.

So perhaps it was fitting that the recent program included the staccato-phrased “Home (1988),” a ballet-noir duet, performed by Varone and Nathalie Desch, which examined the relationship between two people joined at the hip. Today we are encouraged to step away from non-functioning relationships but “Home” looks at one of those for better or for worth “until death do as part” ties. Varone take offers a Sysphusian perspective of nobility and desperation.

Despite Dick Connette’s gray-on-gray score, the dance grabs your guts and never lets go. Its two performers delivered longings and rejections in terms of furtive glances, touches, and shrugs. Beautifully phrased, their intensity gradually increased, yet to no avail. Varone offers no happy ending. The silence of that last grasp was deafening.

I first saw Varone in “Home” in 1991. Now his performance has gained additional weight, with its existential despair buried but skin deep. Desch, quite a bit younger, gave her role the beaten down quality of the Depression as captured in Dorothea Lange photographs.

The mercurial “Lux”, set to the Philipp Glass’ predictable “The Light,” circumvented the music’s tedium in choreography full of contradictory impulses in which dancers collaborated or bounced off each other like sub-atomic particles. But whenever the eye was in danger of being overwhelmed by performers throwing themselves into whipping turns, racing in and out of the wings or snapping



into windblown chains, Varone would throw in blissfully transparent unisons which swept the slate clean.

Eddie Taketa was the softly padding conjurer who welcomed revelers—starting with the stately Erin Owen- into a magic place that he quickly lost control over. At first stepping in place and circling the stage, he seemed to try to pick up the thrust of Glass’s inexorable score and the slowly ascending moon of Robert Wierzel design. But with the exception of Daniel Charon and Ryan Corrison’s soaring duets, the choreography countervailed a trajectory in favor of a sense of permanent suspension. In the end Takame was left wondering what and why something had happened.

If “Lux’s” hyperkineticism could prove wearing, the more intricately layered “Boats Leaving” interspersed frantic energy with episodes of chilling immobility. This was a very dark work—amplified by Jane Cox’s splendid lighting and Liz Prince’s somber costumes. “Lux” looked almost as if Varone had taken the personal in “Home” and transposed it into a social/political arena yet he kept the imagery general enough to avoid stepping into the quagmire of advocacy art.

The piece had a filmic flow to it, with episodes playing at different speeds, including the running of sequences backwards. “Boats” kineticism often recalled war photographs—people belly crawling through fields or high-stepping in water. They stood over a fallen comrade, stacked themselves log-like or corpses. You could read touches of ceremonies. On their knees dancers either bowed or rowed. Desch raised aloft could have been a statue or a flag. They looked like refugees on a raft; Alex Springer needing to be refrained from throwing himself off.

Very effective throughout, Arvo Part’s “Te Deum” hummed over these hapless seekers of calm and safety—repeatedly stepping into a primal circle or sweeping on diagonals like a radar signal. But once again Taketa was left alone—the last on to step onto the gangplank for that final trip into Nothingness.

Photo: Members of Doug Varone and Dancers in “Boats Leaving”
by Tian Qinzhen