

## **SPEAKING OF DANCE**

### **THE ART OF ALCHEMY: DOUG VARONE AND DANCERS**

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Doug Varone has always been something of an alchemist, working in his artist's laboratory to transform the ordinary into the inexplicable. Early alchemists pursued twin goals, transmuting common metals into gold and silver and creating a panacea, or elixir, that would prolong life indefinitely. Images of alchemists from Renaissance paintings show learned men mixing potions and tinkering with scientific equipment. Cryptic symbols and diagrams hint at mystery and secrets.

Doug Varone's artistic experimentation has resulted in a tangible body of work that may well be unparalleled by his contemporaries. Like the true Renaissance man, Varone has moved easily among the worlds of dance, theater, opera, film, television and fashion, tinkering and mixing art forms as he travels. At the heart of his works, no matter where they are staged, or what discipline they are defined by, is a kinesthetic eloquence that is life affirming. Varone, the alchemist, has consistently produced artistic elixir that if unable to prolong life certainly makes it richer while we are here. Over the course of his career, from the founding of his dance company in 1986 to the world premiere of *Alchemy* in 2008, Varone has explored worlds suffused with the reality of our lives forged from common metal. Through his conjuring, however, Varone reveals for us that sometimes the ordinary is in fact the precious for which we've longed.

Whether set in a familiar world, peopled with ordinary folks (*The Bench Quartet*, 1986) or a mythic world, ruled by pagan ritual (*Sacre du Printemps*, 2003) Varone's choreography displays an understanding of the architecture of human relationships. In his works, physical expression combines fierce physicality tempered with inexplicable gesture to demonstrate the actions and reactions of passion. A matter-of-fact equality threads through all of Varone's works, everyone partners everyone else. Everyone leads, everyone follows. Everyone supports, and is supported. The dancing is lyrical, virtuosic, breath taking; his dancers displaying a rough and tumble physicality coupled with exquisite grace.

Varone's choreography is always musically driven, but he is not limited in the kinds of music to which he is attracted. Any piece of music to which he has a physical or an emotional response is fair game for him. And it has resulted in very different works, from *Ballet Mecanique* (2001) with a cacophonous score by George Antheil to the elegiac sound of Arvo Part for *Boats Leaving* (2006). One of the things so compelling about his choreography is the way that it is so difficult to pin down. Varone has wryly commented that when he sets out to begin a new work, he always works to make it the opposite of the piece he made just before.

Tracing a path through his choreographic journey that led him to make *Alchemy* (2008) could start with his 1994 work *Possession* set to music by Philip Glass. This work took its inspiration from the A.S. Byatt novel of the same name. Byatt explored the relationship of two literary scholars who are researching the lives of two long dead poets. Their very separate research quests catapulted them into one another, much as the lives of the poets had long before entwined. Varone's work is not a telling of Byatt's complicated story. Rather, it wrings out essences of the story, especially in the partnerships. Partnerships change and couples seem haunted by other couples. In this work and others, Varone hints at the possibility of the past and present overlapping, exploring the notion that we all exist at the same time in the same places.

Perhaps tapping into energies of the inhabitants who are no longer there, Varone has shown us deeply specific worlds that pulse with humanity. With *Neither* (2000), performed in the Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side of New York City, Varone produced a new level of visceral response in the audience. The cramped tight spaces held small dances that could only be seen by a limited number of viewers at a time. The opposing feelings of intimacy and the confinement of the space layered onto the spectators' bodies as they witnessed bursts of choreography.

*Bottomland* (2002) investigated an imagined world set in the very real landscape of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park. Larger than life video footage of his dancers shot in and around Mammoth Cave National Park played in counterpoint to the human scale of the performers on stage. To the music of Patty Loveless and GaEtan Leboeuf, *Bottomland* is an apt metaphor for much of Varone's work. It is no surprise that he would be drawn to a secret world underneath, to caves that when plumbed reveal larger worlds than could ever be imagined when standing on the surface.

With *Alchemy*, Varone uses the music of Steve Reich to again juxtapose two worlds. Reich's music layers the writings of murdered journalist Daniel Pearl with the Book of Daniel. Varone has said about Reich's score: "There is never a sense where one ends and another begins and the essence is of stories and dreams being recanted. As a result, the defiant correlation between the prophet Daniel and Pearl is enormously profound."

It is no wonder that Varone would find inspiration in the specifics of Reich's score, while moving from that specificity into something broader. Varone understands the dynamics of the layering and the oppositions. He revels in balancing the explicit and the undefined. With the unfurling of fingers the pierce the air, the turning away of a head, and the toss of a body through space, caught suddenly by an unexpected partner, Varone plumbs the possibilities of sorrow and courage. Like alchemists who came before him, and, with choreographic mastery, Varone reminds us again and again that dance can eloquently conjure hope for those who are doing it and those of us who are watching.