

October 25, 2006

## TWO FRESH VARONE MASTERPIECES EMBODY LOSS AND JOY OF COUPLING

*This article originally appeared in the Culture section of Bloomberg News on October 25, 2006.*

Oct. 25 (Bloomberg) -- Doug Varone is the first figure you see in his new "Lux," dancing a solo of cushioned footfalls and whirling arms against an inky backdrop with a rising moon. His brief incantation summons up seven members of his company, dressed like him in black tunics and flaring pants as if they were members of a cult that aspires to ecstasy. Twenty years after founding Doug Varone and Dancers, the 50-year-old choreographer, more or less retired from dancing, is center stage at the Joyce Theater, where the group is performing through Sunday. Varone is the sorcerer who sets his flock in ever-escalating, space-devouring motion (to Philip Glass's pulsating "The Light"). Most of the dance takes place in a shallow horizontal plane; it's a vortex configured as a frieze. All action with little depth, "Lux" is not much of a dance, though the audience, predictably, cheered its wild athleticism. But never mind. The balance of the opening night program, which will be repeated several times, comprises two works I would dare to call masterpieces.

Created last summer for the American Dance Festival and new to New York, the profound "Boats Leaving" is set to Arvo Part's "Te Deum." Eight figures clad in dull-hued rumpled clothes might be any travelers heading for an unknown destination fraught with peril. Are they victims of the Holocaust being transported to the camps? Or perhaps Old World immigrants arriving at Ellis Island?

### Constant Goodbyes

Varone, who keeps these figures generic, says he was exploring the fact that, as we journey through life, we inevitably leave familiar things and dear connections behind us. The dance is based on brief freeze-frame images of groups of people -- Varone derived them from newspaper clippings -- that dissolve into movement that leads to the next tableau. The motion in between the fixed arrangements slowly acquires tremendous emotional force. Simple standing postures become eloquent. Prone bodies pushing themselves across the floor take on a tragic dimension. Arms raised skyward seem to cry out. The participants stalwartly cluster together as a group, evoking hope or at least tenacity, in the face of a threatened bleak outcome. They remain united even when conflict among them spreads like a rampant disease. This makes the end of the piece, when they finally separate, each leaving alone, almost unbearable. Varone's genius here consists of using tactics that are strictly formal, utterly devoid of sentiment, to arouse the spectators' deepest feelings.

"Castles," from 2004, captures the hectic excitement and the quieter, tender feelings of its score, Prokofiev's "Waltz Suite," which includes familiar passages from "Cinderella."

### His Parents Danced

The choreographer, who retains vivid childhood memories of his parents dancing in their living room, naturally co-opts fragments of ballroom dancing. Mostly, though, he keeps the movement in his own eclectic vocabulary: fluid and fast, yet constantly taking the floor into its confidence, and rooted in everyday gesture.

The full-group passages for the eight dancers are stunning examples of Varone's ability to make many different things happen at once while keeping the stage picture coherent. Still, the highlights of the work are its two duets. One, a galumphing dance with sly couplings for a pair of beefy guys, John Beasant III and Daniel Charon, says a lot about how men relate to each other, be they brothers, best friends or lovers. Another, for Natalie Desch and Eddie Taketa, shows an attempted sexual union fraught with physical and psychic dysfunction, yet pursued so devotedly it's as touching as romance.

Not `Dancers'

If ``Castles" has a theme, it's people trying to forge communities by partnering one-on-one -- essential, if failure- plagued, tasks.

One of the several beauties of the piece is that, apart from their stunning agility, the performers don't look like dancers. They look like real people who happen to dance.

Doug Varone and Dancers is at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th Street, through Oct. 29. Information: (1) (212) 242-0800 or [www.joyce.org](http://www.joyce.org). © 2006 Bloomberg L.P. All rights reserved. *Reprinted with permission.*