

Doug Varone Writes the Book

In "Chapters from a Broken Novel," roilingly lush score pushes, but does not master dancers

BY GUS SOLOMONS JR.

Doug Varone and Dancers' Ryan Corrison and Netta Yerushalmy.
(JULIE LEMBERGER)

At times, David Van Tieghem's music threatens to swamp Doug Varone's new "Chapters from a Broken Novel," but Varone's stoked company surfs the roiling, booming swells of the composer's epic-movie-lush score and manages not to get drilled.

At the company's recent Joyce Theater performances, **Varone's seven rocket-powered dancers rode waves of athleticism and emotion in his new, 74-minute suite** of tenuously related episodes.

In a style pervasive in Varone's work, we repeatedly see many postmodern movement vocabulary tropes — backwards running, drops to the floor that roll over the tops of the feet, sliding side falls, and skittering skips impelled by whipping arms. But **Varone's skill is second to none at modulating stage pictures by changing the density, speed, and texture of the action.**

He also liberally inserts gestures of pantomimic literalness that can **reassure even audiences prone to impatience with the abstruseness they associate with postmodern dance.**

A silky sky-cloth by set designer Andrew Lieberman hangs above the bare stage, forming a soft ceiling. On it, the titles of each section of the 20-part piece are projected. In the first section, aptly named "Spilling the Contents," the full company swoops, swirls, and surges in a blur of Varone's signature nonstop motion, driven by Van Tieghem's overwrought score for electronic orchestra. The composer enhances the recorded sound with live percussion from a battery of noise-making props. When this passage ends with silence and a blackout, we exhale.

In "Erased by Degrees," individuals confront Erin Owen at uncomfortably close range, raging at her for some unsaid reason. Later, in "Tile Riot," to a throbbing disco beat, Owen preps in front of her bathroom mirror for a night on the town. Her body can't help wriggling and writhing in anticipation as she flosses, puts on make-up, and primps.

In "Glass," set to pulsing percussion, Netta Yerushalmy crawls up Ryan Corrison's thighs and he lifts her over his supine body in an intimate, sexually implicit coupling that gradually devolves into aggression. In "Target Practice," roving spotlights hunt down frantic Alex Springer, who tries to elude their glare.

One moving episode, "Others in the Room," finds Eddie Taketa and Natalie Desch on their knees, close to but not aware of each other; they make fragmented moves like automatons. Julia Burrer and Springer invade their space and become enablers, helping them to connect. But at the end, Springer carries away a distraught Desch, leaving Taketa prostrate and inert.

In the ensuing "Funeral," Taketa, a Varone veteran, simply rises to a standing position in Butoh-like slow motion, while the music surges to epic heights. Here, the stark contrast between sound and motion really works.

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“Men” is a deadpan slow-dance for Corriston and Springer, but Taketa keeps cutting in, turning it into a funny three-way. The forward edge of the overhead canopy has dropped to form a party tent. Then, in “Égalité,” tall Burrer and petite Desch pair up in a brisk duet, backed by Van Tieghem’s take on Brazilian samba. The canopy, now pulled taut into a diagonal “skylight,” lit from behind, sheds celestial radiance on the opposites-but-equals couple.

A bright golden square frames Yerushalmy’s face at the start of her solo “Twelve Dreams for Rent,” in which she imagines herself as female archetypes — a rock star, a ballerina, a blues diva — all in radically varied moods of light.

Aside from the **wonderful dancers**, the other star of the show is Jane Cox’s marvelous lighting. Making use of the fabric ceiling, she finds myriad ways to transform the space in visual size and atmospheric tone. Sometimes she throws patterned beams on the floor that animate the canopy with shimmering reflected textures and shadows of the onstage dancers. Or she casts the performers into harsh white light that etches them in a sculptural rendering.

In places, “Chapters” lacks the narrative coherence it leads you to expect. After “Glass,” which the characters end in hostility, they return in the ensuing full company section, “Repeated Routines,” dancing alongside each other as if nothing’s happened between them.

Still, **“Chapters” is yet another volume in Varone’s kinetically rich catalog of dances that sear lasting images into your memory.**