

Dancers Couple, Grapple in Doug Varone's 'Dense Terrain' at BAM

By Tobi Tobias

May 18 (Bloomberg) -- The entire backdrop of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater fills with a black-and-white video close-up of a pair of fleshy moving lips as voices chant nonsense syllables to an eerie accompaniment. Onstage are a dozen gleaming office chairs, set in neat rows. Soon the space is invaded by dancers running, grappling and scuttling on all fours as if at war with each other and at the same time determined to form a community, to communicate.

Doug Varone, whose company is celebrating its 20th anniversary, has plenty of experience fusing his choreography with theater. With the New York premiere of "Dense Terrain" Wednesday night (his oddly belated debut at BAM), he revealed a masterly ability to blend dance, music, video and set design with an idea about the human predicament: the daunting challenge of not merely speaking, but of making oneself understood.

In the course of the piece, the onscreen actor (Anthony Cochrane), who seems, by turns, to be a madman, an obsessive professor or God, is seen scribbling gibberish all over the walls and floor of his otherwise barren habitat. Later the writing spills onto huge, roughly plastered panels that the dancers keep moving to reconfigure their space, perhaps to make sense of their world.

Eager, Obedient

Eventually Cochrane appears in the flesh and attempts to teach the dancers his vocabulary, along with cryptic -- but oddly eloquent -- accompanying hand gestures. The students, seated in the primly arranged chairs, are eager and obedient in repeating their lesson by rote. But the moment they're left to their own devices, the material and its ostensible meaning disintegrate. Their inability to connect through either language or gesture seems suddenly tragic.

"Dense Terrain" opens and closes with a solo by Eddie Taketa, who blends extraordinary speed with a deep visceral quality -- a rare gift. Much of the choreography belongs to the ensemble, but Varone is an astute dance architect: He makes sure there are two stunning duets at the heart of the work.

In the first of them, John Beasant III and Ryan Corrison get into a violent fight when the professor's lesson fails them. Even a sudden kiss leaves them frustrated. Their physical rage escalates, climaxing in a sexual union partly diverted to the video screen, as if the men were dreaming it.

The savage duet is offset by a beautiful, ingenious adagio for Daniel Charon and Natalie Desch, the company's most seductive dancers. The passage keeps them recumbent on the floor, simply shifting the forms of an endless embrace. Their tangle of legs and palms reaching around to cradle heads suggests that connection may be possible after all -- even if only just briefly.

Too Complex?

``Dense Terrain" may well be too complex to be fully absorbed in a single viewing (a flaw, if it is one, preferable to that in many pieces on view nowadays that are considerably less than the sums of their parts).

Varone, credited with concept, direction and choreography of ``Dense Terrain," duly thanks his dancers for their input. The art-rock and movie composer Nathan Larson created the score. Allen Moyer designed the set; Blue Land Media, the video; Jane Cox, the lighting. Liz Prince provided costumes deliberately dull-toned and unremarkable to make the performers look like Everyman and Everywoman. If ever there was a symbiotic team, this is it.

Doug Varone and Dancers is at BAM's Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn, through May 20. Information: +1-718-636-4100; <http://www.bam.org> .

(Tobi Tobias is the New York dance critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)