

Doug Varone Divides Opinion; *Bayadere* Challenges A.B.T.

Dense Terrain is ambitious, exciting and moving—but not everyone sees it that way

by [Robert Gottlieb](#) | May 22, 2007

This article was published in the May 28, 2007, edition of *The New York Observer*.

It's always fascinating—and sometimes a little disquieting—when two first-rate critics violently disagree. A jarring example: the response to Doug Varone's *Dense Terrain* last week at B.A.M.

Alastair Macaulay (*The Times*) calls it a “numbingly tedious and relentlessly earnest show.... Not one moment here is fresh.” And more of the same.

Tobi Tobias (Bloomberg) acclaims Varone's “[m]asterly 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.”

I admire these writers and am usually in agreement with both of them. But not this time out. Although *Dense Terrain* seems to me a flawed work, I was utterly gripped by it, as I always am by what Mr. Varone does. This is his first season at B.A.M. (and the 20th anniversary of his company), and he's made a highly ambitious piece, employing all the impedimenta—film projections, sliding panels, voice-overs—that have become a boring symptom of so much modern dance. And yet, like all his work, it's alive, exciting, moving. To hell with the oversize actor who's intoning and shrilling and scribbling an invented language up on the big screen and, later, on the stage itself. It's the dance invention that counts, and the dancers' deep connection with each other.

Varone dancers are kinetically thrilling. They go all the way, both when they're in vivid, rushing motion and when they're in deep stillness. In full flow, they crash across the stage, brushing against each other as they pass, jumping up to carom off each other, every moment unexpected and—yes—fresh. As a group, they're like molecules, breaking up and reforming, yet never randomly—I always sense intelligent design.

But other choreographers create kinetic excitement. What makes Varone so special is the marriage between pure dance thrill and profound human interaction. In two climactic duets, we recognize life as we know it, or sense it. The first is between two men—angry, clashing, frustrated at their inability to connect in any way other than a violent and barren kiss. The second is between a man and a woman—the blond, beautiful Natalie Desch and the affecting Daniel Charon—who lie together on the floor, barely in motion, cupping each other's heads, wrapping a leg over a body, lifting a hand to a face, bound up in their mutual tenderness: a beautiful and moving passage of achieved intimacy as a corrective to the anxieties and frustrations of all that's come before.

How can educated and sophisticated viewers react so differently to a work of art? Is it just Kulture Klash? No, since most of the time there's no Klash at all. On the occasions when we disagree, it may be because we're looking for different things in dance. That's why some of us prefer Paul Taylor to Merce Cunningham, say: It's not a rejection of, or blindness to, one man's genius in favor of the other's; it's a matter of temperament. From the first moment, some years ago, when I first encountered Doug Varone, I knew he was for me.

IT'S THE SAME WITH INDIVIDUAL DANCERS. In the run of *Bayadères* with which A.B.T. has opened its spring season, we've seen a bewildering array of performances, particularly in the central role of Nikiya, the temple dancer who is loved and betrayed by Solor. If you're seeing only the famous “Kingdom of the Shades”

scene—the way we first encountered *Bayadère* in the West—Nikiya is an emblem of pure Kirov classicism. But if you're watching the entire ballet, she's also an exotic, a victim, an object of passion and despair. Her role is a prime example of the dual demands on a ballerina that spark so many 19th-century works: *Swan Lake's* Odette/Odile; *Giselle's* peasant girl and Wili. Mastering all aspects of Nikiya is a formidable challenge. Pavlova was a famous Nikiya; Fonteyn another; the Kirov's Altynai Asylmuratova yet another.

The three ballerinas I saw last week were radically different—and to radically different effect. I have a Veronika Part problem: Her somewhat bovine beauty, her deliberate and affected mannerisms, her unmusicality get in the way of my appreciating her dance glamour. But at least I can understand why others worship her. Paloma Herrera is a pleasing and honest lyrical dancer, but she has neither the sensuality of the temple dancer nor the absolute authority of technique which the “Shades” act calls for.

And then there is Diana Vishneva. She has everything—or almost everything. (I'm not sure I sense deep feeling.) But the beauty of her plastique—that supple back and exquisite arabesque; the easy command; the stage smarts.... She's a supreme example of Kirov training combined with a powerful dance intelligence. Who else is equally impressive as Odette and as the lead girl in Balanchine's *Rubies*—two roles that are almost a contradiction in terms? Her association with A.B.T. is an unalloyed blessing.

The outstanding Solor I saw was David Hallberg—magnificent in his size, pliancy, ardor. He excites without effort and dominates the stage without hogging it. And what an actor! Alas, he wasn't paired with Vishneva, whom he would set off more effectively than Ethan Stiefel does, whereas Stiefel would look more comfortable with the shorter Herrera. Stiefel, hardly an actor at all—and sometimes one wishes he wouldn't try—is looking good after his recent knee problems, but he's no Indian warrior: He's a dazzling all-American boy trapped in a 19th-century melodrama (and not one, like *Le Corsaire*, that he can have fun with).

Another dancer about whom viewers disagree is that other American whiz-bang, Gillian Murphy. She was trained by Melissa Hayden, which means she's a Balanchine dancer—strong, quick, musical. I liked her very much as Gamzatti (the Amneris character)—her acting is improving and she was well up to the technical challenges of the betrothal-scene pas de deux. Various highly knowledgeable British and Russian observers find the tightness in Murphy's upper body—the lack of *épaulement*—impossible to get past, despite their acknowledgement of her dance powers. For me, her thrusting brilliance is primary. But then my eye was formed by Balanchine, who famously sniffed, “The English dance from the waist up.”

There were other gratifying performances sprinkled through these *Bayadères*. No one could fault Herman Cornejo's brilliant Bronze Idol: He's a paragon of dynamic excitement fused with non-showoff ease. (Baryshnikov is the greatest example of a dancer with this combination of qualities, but then Baryshnikov was a paragon of everything.) Both Stella Abrera and Michele Wiles were convincing Gamzattis. Perhaps Craig Salstein, recently promoted to soloist, was over the top as the Head Fakir, but you can't do too much in this role, you can only do too little; he galvanized the opening temple scene. And, finally, a tip of the hat to Sarawane Tanatanit, whose Aya, Gamzatti's servant, carries servility to new heights—or depths. Oh, the mysterious East