



THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

March 3, 2009

Varone's Meditation on Daniel Pearl

By Robert Gottlieb

AT THE JOYCE we were graced with Doug Varone's annual visit. The big new piece sounded dire—*Alchemy*, music by Steve Reich, a reflection on the death of Daniel Pearl. Varone is too smart, though, to give us a narrative; rather, he presents four beleaguered men against a powerful image of a prison stone wall, and four women who rally to them, try to protect them and grieve for them. What makes it work is his profound humanity—the way his women and men touch, engage, respond. Somehow, although his eight highly individual dancers are all superbly trained, they come across, at least to me, less as “dancers” than as “people who dance.” In other words, I take them personally. *Alchemy* is in no way a political statement. The death of Pearl is not the subject of this work but the inspiration for a tragic consideration of life and death.

The same eight dancers, the same kind of propulsive minimalist score (“The Light,” by Philip Glass), and yet *Lux* is in total contrast to *Alchemy*. The latter piece is all anxiety and anguish; the former all celebration—of life and hope. It's a nonstop rush of energy, of connection. These dancers really do suggest a single organism combining and recombining, totally abandoned to the thrill of movement. The Glass score immediately reminds us of Tharp's *In the Upper Room*, and not to Varone's disadvantage.

Finally, Varone brought back a lovely work from 2000 called *Tomorrow*, to seven ravishing songs by Reynaldo Hahn. I only wish he had placed *Tomorrow* between *Lux* and *Alchemy*: The contrast would have helped all three pieces and given the audience some calm between the storms.

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