

The murder of Daniel Pearl becomes unforgettable evening of dance

by Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger

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Doug Varone and Dancers

Where: The Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Ave. at 19th Street, New York

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 7:30 p.m. Sunday; 2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

How much: \$19-\$49. Call (212) 242-0800 or visit joyce.org.



NEW YORK -- Doug Varone's new dance "Alchemy," is a masterful creation, a grim but exquisitely beautiful creation inspired by the 2002 murder of reporter Daniel Pearl.

Varone's response to composer Steve Reich's "Daniel Variations," which Doug Varone and Dancers presented Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, is heavy with suggestions of confinement. The backdrop by Timothy R. Mackabee depicts an oppressive stone wall, and much of the action takes place in an earthbound plane.

In slow moments four men lie on the ground with the limp despair of prisoners, or rub their arms as if they were sore from being tied. Gestures like crossing their wrists or placing their hands behind their heads have ominous implications. Yet at other times the men's spirits seem free, and they dash across the space -- if only in their minds.

That unreachable kernel of personal freedom is connects "Alchemy" to Christopher Bruce's 1987 "Swansong," a dance in which a prisoner, in between brutal interrogations, finds an outlet within. Such cruelties, of course, are not restricted to a particular time or place.

Varone presents his scenario with typical earnestness, however, eschewing the detachment of irony. He doesn't show us Pearl's tormentors (Pearl, who was on the trail of those behind shoe bomber Richard Reid, was kidnapped, held prisoner, and eventually murdered in Karachi, Pakistan). The men are all Daniel Pearl, and by extension we are, too. They struggle to remain connected, look down at their writers' hands and find the strength to assert their identity. The text for Reich's cantata affirms "My name is Daniel Pearl (I'm a Jewish American from Encino California)," and Varone's dance captures a martyr's plainspoken courage.

The women in "Alchemy" offer redemptive foils. Dressed in shades of sky-blue -- the men wear earth tones -- they resemble guardian angels who follow the prisoners and share their fate. At one point, they cradle the men's heads and adjust their limbs. Yet in moments of desperate agitation, the women seem powerless to intervene.

Erin Owen is the focal point. She raises her hands slowly to cover her face, murmuring inaudibly, or she reaches skyward jolted by a sudden movement like an intake of breath. Her smallest gestures have a penetrating intimacy. At the end, the women face upstage. Joining hands they raise their heads to greet a light, like sunrise, beyond the wall.

Joining "Alchemy" on this mixed bill are older works -- breezy "Lux" and that emotional hothouse, "Tomorrow." In these dances complex patterns unfurl with deft assurance, their symmetries discreet. The choreographer's sensitivity is reflected in meaningful looks and in the delicacy with which individuals brush against one another. Touch is an essential element.

Speed is Varone's plaything when a movement impulse winds down gradually, or when individuals pause, suspended at a tilt on the verge of beginning a new, breakneck phrase. The work is relaxed yet full of surprises (backward is always an option, even when running) and marvelously balanced groupings underscore Varone's creative audacity.

This program is spectacular, and dance lovers should rush to catch its breath of genius.

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Photo © PHIL KNOTT Eddie Taketa and Natalie Desch of Doug Varone and Dancers in "Alchemy."