

Doug Varone Swims Deep Rivers

By Deborah Jowitt

Doug Varone's works sometimes make me think of small rivers on long journeys—rivers that flow serenely, curve to evade an obstacle, glance off a stone, suddenly burst into a waterfall. That's how the [luscious torrent of movement](#) he conceived is shaped and how his dancers behave with one another. Except that they're human beings, not running water, and they choose their courses. Who wouldn't like to move through life the way they travel on and off the stage—fluidly, resiliently, and confident that if they fall, they will be caught?

Often the choreography yields images of hesitancy, difficult decisions, small stumbling blocks. At one point in the poignant 2000 *Tomorrow*, set to songs by Reynaldo Hahn, Natalie Desch traces a wavering path, while mezzo-soprano Theodora Hanslowe and pianist Dennis Giauque swaddle her in music as soft as the smoke of the song's title ("Fumée"). Desch's small steps, her subtle aversions, and the way she drags a foot as if wounded convey a current of life diverted. At the end, she pushes away the man (Eddie Taketa) she danced with earlier, even as she collapses against him.

Taketa begins the 2006 *Lux* with a similarly tentative journey. The music, Philip Glass's *The Light* (1987), conveys a sense of waiting, of never quite arriving. In *Lux*, Taketa seems to be a leader, presiding over what almost reaches the turbulence of a bacchic revel. The moon (lighting by Robert Wierzel) is low on the horizon when the dance starts and rises as the movement patterns tangle and unfurl endlessly. Glass's composition sounds very much like the one he created a year earlier for Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*, and watching and hearing passages that repeatedly build to a climax and then evaporate can be tiring. Without a reassuring dollop of unison or a formation that stays together for a while, *Lux* can occasionally make you feel as if you're drowning in a flood of beauty.

Varone's new *Alchemy* is sterner stuff, but if anyone can turn the rusted iron of tragedy into gold, it would be he. The music he has chosen makes the subject inevitable. Steve Reich's "Daniel Variations" combines text from the Book of Daniel with the words of Daniel Pearl in a tribute to victims whose dignity and courage doesn't fail them. The biblical Daniel rose high among the Persians, but for persisting in his Judaism was cast into a den of lions. The American journalist Daniel Pearl, also a follower of Judaism, was taken hostage by Pakistani militants in 2002 and brutally executed.

The dance takes place in front of a virtual wall of giant stones, designed by Timothy R. Mackabee. When relevant, Jane Cox's darkly gleaming lighting lays the grid of another kind of prison on the floor. Liz Prince's skillfully designed costumes in grays, blues, and browns don't call attention to themselves. Erin Owen—often alone in a spotlight, tremulous, pressing her hands to her face—presents the strongest image of a brave victim, or, perhaps Mariane Pearl, Daniel's wife, whose words "In the end, you can only oppose them with the strength they think they have taken away from you" appear in the program.

Alchemy fleetingly evokes both the Daniels, as well as other victims. Men grovel around Desch, like the biblical lions. Periodically four men or four women line up shoulder to shoulder and kneel. Owen writes something on the air, and it's she who catches Ryan Corrison as he's collapsing. Women hover, mourning, over fallen men. People crawl as much as they walk and run. Daniel Charon gets pulled around by his head. But this is a dance, not a pantomime, and just as voices cry out and sink back in Reich's driving music, the abstracted violent acts are part of a powerful shifting tide of terror and courage told in movement.

In addition to Charon, Corrison, Desch, Owen, and Taketa, the [eloquent and powerful performers](#) are Julia Burrer, Alex Springer, and Netta Yerushalmy.

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