

DANCE PREVIEW

A double dose of Doug Varone in Cultural District

By Jane Vranish, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Alchemy," performed here by Eddie Taketa and Natalie Desch of Doug Varone and Dancers, juxtaposes the words of slain journalist Daniel Pearl and his wife, Mariane, with the Book of Daniel. PHOTO PHIL KNOTT

It's rare when Pittsburgh Dance Council audiences get to see multiple facets of a choreographer's talents, and that usually occurs over the course of many seasons of dedicated viewing.

But New York choreographer Doug Varone's handiwork is already on display in Pittsburgh Opera's "The Grapes of Wrath," and will come into focus again with the Dance Council presentation of his company at the Byham on Saturday night.

It's the unforced theater of his dances, laced with an underlying humanity, that transcends the various art forms so easily. From Broadway to Geoffrey Beane's couture runway shows and from Kentucky's Mammoth Caverns, where he choreographed a work for "Dance in America," to New York City Opera, Varone always feels at home.

Although the award-winning choreographer was brought into the production by composer Ricky Ian Gordon, it was the enormous scope of a work like "Grapes of Wrath" that sealed the deal.

Varone lives on two movement edges -- first, the larger sense of physicality, and second, the small specifics of gestural work. So while the Pittsburgh Opera production has two structured "dances" -- a square dance and the choreographed human river that takes Rosasharn's child away -- it is the Pittsburgh Opera chorus, essentially untrained, that perform the "steps."

And it is the small moments of gestural work, both by the chorus and the soloists, that give the opera a certain clarity. "The best directors and the best choreographers work together to make a seamless effect," says Varone. "So you're never sure when you're watching the choreography and you're never sure when you're watching the staging."

Varone uses the same approach when he is working with his own company. "I specifically direct my dancers to just 'be,'" he explains. "There's a sense of honesty in terms of how they relate to each other. If there's a sense of drama, it comes from the choreography. But it also comes from the actions and the tasks that are happening."

So the Dance Council performance will contain three diverse works, all of which use the movement to tell a different story. "Tomorrow" will use a series of relationships inspired by turn-of-the-century songs composed by Reynaldo Hahn. Varone calls "Lux" one of those pieces that "needed to be made." In the midst of creating dark works, he decided to use his dancers as "exploring animals in an incredibly virtuosic piece."

The final work, "Alchemy," juxtaposes the words of journalist Daniel Pearl and his wife, Mariane, with the Book of Daniel. Varone heard Steve Reich's "heartbreaking" score in New York in 2006.

Without being literal, he wanted to create, like Reich, a "homage, not just to Pearl himself, but to victims of violent crimes." But he needed to put away the readings and go into the studio to "create a work that spilled out of me."

"It's about grieving. It's about loss. So people see themselves, see their lives in it as it passes in front of them," Varone observes. "I love that about dancemaking, that it can do that without words." But he also feels that it is a very hopeful work, one that, like alchemy itself, turns something horrific into something good.

"Alchemy" was an important part of an ongoing artistic process that allowed the veteran choreographer to reinvent himself. It's something that he thinks is "absolutely necessary in order to renew and challenge your heart, your mind and your purpose as an artist." *