

Varone's 'Alchemy' brings good from tragedy

BY MARK KANNY



Success brings opportunity -- and usually a busier schedule. Choreographer Doug Varone leaves Pittsburgh this morning after helping Pittsburgh Opera prepare for the last night's opening of its production of "The Grapes of Wrath."

Next weekend, he'll be back in the Cultural District with his dance company to present a trio of works, including "Alchemy," which had its world premiere in October.

Varone says the three pieces being presented by Pittsburgh Dance Council "are completely different in their approach as dances, but what they have in common is they elicit a sense of humanity. For me, that's the

more important thing about this art form and why I love it so much."

Doug Varone and Dancers will perform "Alchemy," "Tomorrow" and "Lux" on Saturday night at the Byham Theater, Downtown.

Varone's involvement in "The Grapes of Wrath" should come as no surprise. He has collaborated with composer Ricky Ian Gordon before and directed new and repertory operas at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, as well as musicals.

Music starts the choreographic process 90 percent of time for Varone, who says he has eclectic tastes. "I have a very large music library and listen to a lot of music. I'm looking for things that compel me to create. It's always a mystery to me when I'm drawn to a score that in some way tells me a story. The story doesn't need to be clear. I try to visualize a deeper level of what I'm hearing."

Varone, 52, got into tap dancing when he was 5 and from there naturally into musical theater. In fact, he began college with Broadway on his mind, but in his sophomore year, he fell under the power of contemporary dance.

He danced professionally for about a decade, including a year with the Jose Limon Dance Company and eight years with Lars Lubovitch. "It was a very fertile time for Lars. I learned a great deal of craft. As far as I'm concerned, it was an apprenticeship as a dancer," he says

Doug Varone and Dancers was formed in 1986. The four men and four women range in age from 22 to 49. "A good many of the dancers are in their mid-thirties. I love artists in the middle of their careers. They are beautifully mature artists who bring their life to the works they create," he says.

The newest work, "Alchemy," was inspired by hearing "Daniel Variations" by Steve Reich at the composer's 70th birthday concert in 2006. The music was commissioned by the Pearl Foundation in memory of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter who was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists in 2002.

Varone's research convinced him that Pearl "was just an incredible soul. He and his wife, Mariane, were journalists of such an open mind that they lived on the fence. They wanted to listen to every side of every story. Then he became part of this horrific story that is even sadder because the people who killed him lost a potential ally in telling their story."

The form of Reich's music -- alternating movements based on the book of Daniel in the Bible and on Pearl's writings and videotape of his capture -- is the form of the dance piece, too, Varone says. "The score builds in intensity but leaves the listener with a very hopeful sense. The dance we created, I think, at least I hope, parallels that by going through great emotional intensity to find a very healing sense in the end. Hence the title -- alchemy -- turning something tragic into something good."

The other Varone pieces on the program are less topical. The choreographer's love of French Belle Epoch songs led the treatment of relationships in "Tomorrow."

"It is a very intimate work with a series of duets and solos intertwined with each other, with a beautiful sense of embrace about it," Varone says. The music is a recording of songs composed by Reynaldo Hahn. "There certainly is a libretto to follow, and for the way Susan Graham sings these songs, as if there is another musical instrument; I follow off of what I'm hearing and how the timbre of her voice changes and shifts."

"Lux" was created in 2006 during an exceptionally busy time, with a half dozen projects going on. He'd been working on two tragedies -- Gordon's "Orpheus and Eurydice" and Tobias Picker's "An American Tragedy" -- and needed more optimistic work.

He found it in "Lux" by minimalist composer Philip Glass, which Varone says he used to explore the space between people. "I wanted to start by percolating very slowly and then explode in many ways. It has a purely movement-based sense of effervescence that takes the piece and moves it forward." ♦

