

Varone's "Alchemy" works its anguished magic

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Sunday October 05, 2008, 9:46 AM

REVIEW

Doug Varone and Dancers

Art doesn't have to be pretty. It can (and must) tell us things we don't want hear or see, haunt our consciences and provide glimpses into the darkness of life.

The bleak eloquence of Doug Varone's "Alchemy" affords yet another viewpoint amid the despair: the ability of human beings never to give up hope. The theme is encapsulated in this significant new work, whose world premiere Doug Varone and Dancers gave Saturday at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron.

The piece was commissioned by Thomas Hall and the University of Akron, where Varone and his New York-based company spent last week in residence. Their program Saturday was the season-opening event for DanceCleveland, which helped make the collaboration possible.

Varone has been at the forefront of contemporary dance during the past two decades, when his invigorating and thought-provoking creations have had a striking impact on eyes and brains. "Alchemy" fits forcefully into the Varone canon, with its bold images of oppression, anguish and the strength of the human spirit.

Inspired by words of slain American journalist Daniel Pearl and the Book of Daniel, the work is a spare, piercing denunciation of brutality. An enormous stone wall upstage places the narrative in its prison context. Four men (dressed in gray and black) and four women (shades of blue) express the uncertainty of incarceration in spasmodic gestures, compassionate asides and ensemble interaction.

Varone suggests myriad psychological states as the dancers cover their faces or briefly break free of the relentless tension. Set to American composer Steve Reich's simmering "Daniel Variations," Varone's newest creation refuses to compromise.

At the end, the women move downstage, illuminated by light from above, while the men rise behind them, their backs to the audience, defying the evil that can't shatter their noble resolve. The Varone dancers brought fierce intensity to their urgent duties.

Varone's "Tomorrow" (2000) reveals other aspects of the choreographer's craft. Rapturous songs by Reynaldo Hahn (performed on a recording by uncredited artists) provide the impetus for this searching exploration of relationships. The music's quiet poetry is beautifully reflected in the soaring arm gestures, gentle pushes and fluid floor patterns performed by six dancers in flowing white attire. Jane Cox's lyrical lighting casts a rainbow of expressive nuances on this tender meditation.

For total contrast, "Lux" (2006) is a study in cascading bodies dressed in black and flinging themselves in front of a rising moon. Philip Glass' eternally swirling score, "The Light" (which had its premiere by the Cleveland Orchestra in the mid-1980s), is the catalyst for Varone's euphoric burst of athleticism, an almost perpetual-motion test for eight dancers.

It is a whirlwind of dizzying circular configurations and darting arms and legs. How the Varone dancers maintain the stamina to fly and jog and twirl with such controlled abandon, only they can tell. The results were exhilarating.