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VARONE DANCERS--ALMOST AIRBORNE

By Paul Hertelendy

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Choreographer Doug Varone lays out the philosophy of his company directly. "I start with the music---I'm aurally driven, whether it takes three weeks or three months, I make dances. (With these) I want to make a difference. I don't want dances where 10 minutes later you've forgotten all about it."

Doug Varone and Dancers from New York City are in their 19th season, and Varone still takes a turn on stage with his eight dancers in the all-Varone, all-West-Coast premiere program seen here April 7-8. They're a very exciting, high-flying modern-dance group. But out here, unfortunately, they are woefully unfamiliar, thanks to their 15-year absence from the region.

San Francisco Performances, one of the area's major dance presenters, finally brought them back, even though it was right on the heels of another New York company (Paul Taylor). It's high time, too, for a compact troupe that can fill the stage with its high velocity and windmilling arms, all emanating from a very wholesome, indefatigable ensemble characterized by a low turnover over the years.

I think composer John Adams himself would have been fascinated with Varone's setting the concert piece "Fearful Symmetries" to the dance medium in "Rise" (1993), where the minimalism is a driving force setting the dancers into whirlwinds of movement.

Overall, this is a barefoot company of discipline, continuity and seeming fearlessness, unfazed when thrown across the floor or lifted as if unexpectedly. The DV&D is a very close-knit group, but two stood out consistently: Adriane Fong and John Beasant III.

The closing number "Castles" (2004) is an intoxicating escapade of waltzes by the much underrated Russian composer Serge Prokofiev. Whether in falls, spins or lifts, the meticulously deployed ensemble draws the audience along in its vortex of vitality, seemingly incapable of fatigue. I had no sooner jotted down that Varone should choreograph Prokofiev's evening-length "Cinderella" than the finale number of Op. 110 unveiled the irresistible waltz from that very opus, clinching the surmise.

I suppose no well-planned dance event is complete without a disturbing dramatic piece; if anything, the duo "The Thing of This World" overachieved. Here Varone himself plays this predatory welter of conflicting and ambiguous emotions who collects a partner-victim and then consumes him in a homosexual rape.

Though Varone is a generation older than any in his ensemble, he moves well, with rapid darts and cuts that reflect the character's inherent instabilities. The score was the no-less-violent music of cross-over composer Steve Mackey, who has a sizable counter-culture following (despite being played on mainline symphony subscription programs).

All the music was prerecorded.

Doug Varone and Dancers, one of many dance presentations at the Yerba Buena Gardens Theater, 3rd & Howard Streets, S.F. For info: (415) 978-2787 or go online
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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years. These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.