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A Weekend in New York

Doug Varone and Dancers

The Joyce Theater

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by Clare Croft

When I return to New York, I search for three things: choreographers whose work I have not seen, choreographers whose work I love, and work that will never make it to more conservative Washington. This weekend in New York, I hit the first two. I saw the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in their twentieth anniversary program at BAM and Doug Varone and Dancers at the Joyce.....



Doug Varone, with his gesture based style, also draws from the everyday, but creates a much "dancier" effect than the Jones/Zane company. Varone's 2002 *The Bottomland*, a celebration of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park, has one of the best integrations of video and dance that I have seen. The video footage, all filmed in the Park, filled the stage's back wall. Varone conceived and directed the video, with photography direction by Rob Draper and Vincent Gancie and production by Blue Land Media. The video introduced the dancers, then became

both a backdrop for the onstage dancing and a character within the choreography. The video was most powerful in "Someone I Used to Know," a duet for Natalie Desch and Larry Hahn. Onstage, the two jerked through a duet of a disintegrating couple, grabbing at each other, long past the possibility of a reconciling embrace. On the video screen, the couple of the past waltzed with giant smiles and gentle eyes.

Hahn retired from the Varone Company last fall, returning only as a guest artist for *The Bottomland*, but his presence is a welcome one. After the video begins, each dancer walks slowly onstage, stands feet together and looks at the audience. Hahn joins last, walking down the middle of the stage to end up dead center. Once he arrives, the piece can begin. Hahn remains a fine dancer, but his presence, so solid, reassuring and deep, is what makes his performance so beautiful, bringing everyone together.

All the dancers of *The Bottomland* interpret the sorrow and the joy in the Patty Loveless songs well. Adriane Fang brings youthful exuberance to the jumping, skipping "Pretty Little Miss" and Nina Watt, another returning dancer, performs "Sorrowful Angels" with weight and sensitivity.

In *Castles*, the evening's new work, is set to Prokofiev, much of it familiar as the score for the ballet *Cinderella*. Much of *Castles'* movement relies on the peripheral: the dancers' arms and legs constantly propelled their bodies into the air and across the stage. In two duets Varone displays his ability to show a range of emotional connections between couples, John Beasant III and Daniel Charon first, Natalie Desch and Kayvon Pourazar second. In the men's duet, a harried mating ritual of discordant desire, the two avoid each other, then grab for the other at the last possible second. In the second duet, Desch repeatedly climbs through Pourazar's raised arms and unfolding legs as the two struggle to find a way to hold each other, finally collapsing in each other arms at the duet's close.

Castles works well because the costumes, lights and music all reflect and enhance the choreography. Everything about Varone's movement dangles: the dancers toss their arms and their feet slap the floor. *The Castles'* costumes, designed by Liz Prince, replicate this dangling looseness, cut at angles on the legs and arms and swaying about the dancers' bodies. The lights, designed by Jane Cox and Joshua Epstein, particularly in the opening section where twenty or more tiny spots of light give a sense of a multitude of tiny rooms within one big space, make me wonder if each section offers a glimpse into one part of a complicated world.

The evening ended with *Rise* (1993), a high energy dance to John Adams' *Fearful Symmetries*. A bit of an Energizer bunny dance, the pace suited Adriane Fang and Catherine Miller particularly well. Fang began with a driving solo, her intensity growing throughout, until she was throwing every inch of her body into the choreography by the first section's close. Miller obviously enjoyed the punching angularity of the movement; her mouth fighting a smile as she danced with John Beasant III.

The first section ended in the only way such a frenetic piece could, with the dancers in a giant pile as the lights went black. I, along with most of the audience, thought the piece had ended, but the group returned for anti-climatic slow, short solos.

Both the Jones and Varone programs ran through Sunday.

Photo: From *Bottomland*, photo: Scott Suchman.

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