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The DanceView Times, New York edition

## Doug Varone and Dancers

"Castles," "Boats Leaving" and "Lux"

Doug Varone and Dancers

Joyce Theater

New York, NY

Oct. 25, 2006

by Susan Reiter

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Among the many deeply satisfying aspects of Doug Varone's 20th-anniversary program of three works was the welcome, and increasingly rare, true craftsmanship on display. Varone's musical instincts and spatial awareness were unfailingly on the mark, but there was another element at play — something instinctual, presumably inborn rather than learned, that imbues his dances with an organic shape and

inner motor as well as profound logic. Using just eight dancers, and smartly elegant design elements, he offered works that seized the viewer with quietly insistent intensity, and resonated well beyond the two hours in the theater.

"Castles," a quirkily inventive exploration of Prokofiev's "Waltz Suite," opus 110, lived up to my strong memories of its 2004 premiere. Through shifting alliances, moments of beauty as well as ungainliness, it creates a hauntingly appropriate visual equivalent to Prokofiev's surging rhythms and acidic melodies. Two of the waltzes in the suite are very familiar from "Cinderella," yet they sound fresh and different as Varone applies his own keen intelligence and textured movement to them. The music's insinuating melodies and abrupt hesitations are expertly absorbed in the dancing.

In the ensemble sections, movement spills and tumbles through the space, lit with dappled patterns by Jane Cox and Joshua Epstein. The eye is captivated by unexpected off-kilter moments, as the terrific, robust dancers pour themselves into the action with fearless spontaneity. Liz Prince's layered, soft costumes in shades of beige, rust and brown droop and flow casual grace. The work's two more intimate sections, an intriguingly awkward duet for John Beasant III and Daniel Charon, and a dreamy interlude for Eddie Taketa and Natalie Desch, offered beautiful contrast to the more imposing, propulsive, deliciously off-kilter group sections. Especially memorable was the whiplash power of Adrienne Fang, carving through space with fantastic vigor.



The two most recent works receiving their local premieres were set to two of the most over-used composers on the dance scene: Philip Glass and Arvo Part. One sees those names in a program and the immediate reaction is, “not again!” But all credit to Varone for making his own persuasive case for these musical choices, and finding a fresh impetus in the scores he chose.\

“Boats Leaving” was a hauntingly melancholy, meditative work set to Part’s “Te Deum,” which featured angelic vocals amid its fervent, plaintive sounds. Varone has shaped the work around the force that holds together an ensemble, as the dancers slip in and out of clusters, pausing, waiting, separating only to reassemble. In their simple, muted costumes, displaying quietly focused intensity, these people seem to be hovering on the edge of tragedy, awaiting rescue or praying for salvation. The movement seems to happen almost imperceptibly, as the stage picture is deftly shifted and rearranged, but always with a tone of protective gentleness. Groupings break apart, the pace becomes busier, but then a frozen group image will suspend everything. Whatever is holding this community together, it seems to be what sustains them. But in the final moments they let go of that bond, departing on individual paths, and one trembles for wherever they are headed. Mesmerizing and heart-rending, this is a work that certainly merits more than one viewing.



Varone himself led off “Lux,” a more hopeful, outward-looking work that takes its title from the Glass score, “The Light.” Displaying his marvelously fluid range of motion in his shoulders, he swung his arms in wide arcs and seemed to conjure the increasingly wide-open, celebratory movement that followed, as the other dancers began to join in. As a white disc of a moon rises imperceptibly at the middle of the inky

cyclorama, the dancers ride along the accumulating energy of Glass’ score — beautiful, somewhat wild creatures devouring space. The seemingly black costumes reveal a strip of white here and there, as their forceful movement sends material flying open. Varone’s controlled lushness and ever-changing, subtly controlled stage picture give a heartfelt depth and power to the cascading momentum.

Photos, all from “Boats Leaving,” by Tian Qinzheng.

Volume 4, No. 40 November 13, 2006