

Letter from San Francisco, Number 6

Doug Varone & Dancers
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

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by Rita Felciano
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Last November I saw a rather remarkable collaboration, "The Invisible Man," between **Doug Varone and Dancers** and the Aquila Theatre Company in New York City. What struck me most about this retelling in movement and gesture of the H.G. Wells classic was the clarity of its narrative structure and the possibilities of developing characters without verbal language. Much credit also has to go to Anthony Cochrane's wonderous score which nourished the work like rain trickling down to the roots of a plant. Several times, when the piece hit dry spots, the music kept it alive.

It's one thing to have a character materialize and evaporate on screen, it's quite another to do so within the confines of the stage. And it probably could only have been done with dancers who, unhampered by the restrictive specificity of language, could effectively explore ambiguity and implication. Varone dancer Daniel Charon gave an extraordinary, convincing interpretation of a scientist who finds himself in a experiment gone awry that turns increasingly Kafkaesque. Exasperation, rage, helplessness and sheer paranoia oozed like poisonous gas from his hospital room to the nursing station and back again. It stripped away at the protective layers of his suit but also of those starched white uniforms, revealing flawed, fragile and insecure human beings. Quite unlike the Canadian Stage Company's similar attempt at non-verbal theater in "The Overcoat"—performed by "dancing actors"—Aquila Theater's and Varone's use of gesture, dance, pedestrian movement and mime was subtle, haunting and emotionally true.

So it was not really that much of a surprise that in its first Bay Area appearance in fifteen years, Doug Varone and Dancers' "The Thing of the World" presented Varone and John Beasant III in a volatile, intense relationship whose ambiguous implications were both sought and feared. In these Brokeback Mountain days, it is easy to tease out the duet's homo-erotic context, which certainly was there, but the 2004 work could just as easily be read as a father/son, brother/brother,

inarticulate testosterone-driven contest of will, of love, of passion. As a study of ambiguity and self-doubt "Thing" brilliantly raises answerless questions. When does an embrace turn into a chokehold, a touch into shove? Was that nuzzle a kiss or a bite? That insistently raised arm a flag of truce or the down beat for a fight? The slight swagger of Varone's pascings reminded me of Brando's Stanley Kowalsky who was just as emotionally inarticulate, now matter how loudly he screamed after Stella.

On first glance the curtain opener "Rise" (1993), appeared like a pure movement piece. It certainly rode the peaks and valleys of John Adams' "Fearful Symmetry" as if its eight dancers had jumped on a speeding train that got away. But the color-coded costumes identified the dancers as couples. We met them much like people who show up at party together and then dissolve into the crowd. Adriane Fang's arm swinging strides got the show going; when he tagged in, she confidently wrapped her courting partner, Eddie Taketa, around her waist. Fang was the one who wandered through the volatile dancing as wondering how she had ended up in this chattering beehive of activity. Catherine Miller and Beasant III's laconic unisons suggested boredom and familiarity. Firecracker Natalie Desch and Charon's connection was more lyrical but also more playful. Varone is so inventive coming up with sparkling, yet fragmentary constellations. A circle out of nowhere surges around a center. A duet plops the woman on his hips. These party goers, if such they were, looked driven but also in tune. A key seemed to be the whirlwind chains, with participants both giddy and desperate. Choreographically, the music's throwing climax appeared too literally translated, and the coda, in which the dancers re-introduced themselves, felt like an afterthought.

In the tongue-in-cheek "Castles" (2004), to Prokofiev's "Waltz Suite, Opus 110, Varone seems to have had a double goal: look at social dance's decorum and at how infatuation can sweep you off your feet. He placed two emotionally fragile but kinetically robust duets into an environment of soaring febrile ensemble dancing. Charon and Beasant III's, despite the difference in tone, used language to similar to the evening's previous one. The other one for Desch and Taketa had an almost puppy love teasing to it. These young lovers showed off for each other, whether scooting on their bellies or reaching for an ankle or into impossible arabesque. A charmingly witty quartet for Desch, Stephanie Liapis and Miller took on partnering, with the three women crawling on all fours and falling all over each other before passing a slightly befuddled but high leaping Taketa around.

There is an intoxicating vintage wine quality to Prokofiev score which soaked these surging encounters with a ghost-like quality, their surface lightness not withstanding. Much of it felt like memories from more formal times—hands placed on waists, bows and curtsies, fragments of waltz steps, even a polka. But in these more turbulent days, arms flail, feet stomp and you slide between your partner's legs instead of into his arms.