

▶ DANCE

Fearful Symmetry

By Mae G. Banner

Doug Varone and Dancers

The Egg, June 1

Dancers love to dive into Doug Varone's choreography. They call it lush, by which they mean Varone's moves spool out in unending loops and tangles, flaring across the stage or jamming up in an unexpected corner, sometimes slowing down, but never fully stopping.

You don't see steps or clear-cut floor patterns in dances like *Castles* (2004), which opened the Doug Varone and Dancers' concert at the Egg. Instead, the dance responds in the largest way to Prokofiev's astringent *Cinderella* ballet waltzes, the eight dancers surging and subsiding to the dynamics of the music, but never stepping note for note.

Varone wants you to feel the swells and twists of the music more than tease out its inner voices. He works big, painting a grand swirl of spiraling, jumping, or crouching bodies, with a whiff of danger (that clock will strike 12, after all) just beyond the exhilaration of the dance.

Castles, in six parts, included a forceful duet for John Beasant III and Daniel Charon, punctuated with audible smacks when one man gripped the other around the waist, then broke and dove between his legs. A male-female duet for blonde, balletic Natalie Desch and bushy-haired Kayvon Pourazar exuded cheek-to-cheek romance.

But the full ensemble sections set the true tone of this strange ball. Costumer Liz Prince added flourishes of red silk to the edges of the men's calf-length pants and the women's overskirts, so they flared at every lift and swing. These vertical lifts and tilt-a-whirl swings could pop up anywhere, at any time, adding color and surprise to the larger action.

Varone considers himself a choreographer of extremes. While he likes to move crowds of people across the stage, he's also known for highly nuanced duets that read like short stories by Raymond Carver. One of these is *Home* (1988), which Varone danced with guest artist Peggy Baker. The two were colleagues in the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company before Varone founded his own company in 1986.

The inclusion of *Home* was an event because it brought these two seasoned dancers together and because Varone, immersed in making new work, scarcely dances these days. To see him and Baker enact this conversation of gestures was to see into the choreographer's brain.

Two wooden chairs. Two people in black tops and pants. A tense, choked call and response made from the merest indications of intent: a look, a nod, a slight pressure of his hand on her knee, her head turning away. Sometimes, one person's movement seems to go toward and away from the other in the same instant, saying both yes and no.

She's exasperated. He's insistent. She splays her two hands over her gut. He gets up and walks in a tight circle away from her. You can almost hear one of them say, "We never talk." You know we've all been there.

The final work, *Rise* (1993), released the tension of *Home* in whorls of centrifugal force. Set to John Adams' jazzy *Fearful Symmetries*, *Rise* looks casual, almost slumped, as loose-limbed androgynously costumed couples swing out in a series of duets that grow into trios, then clump together in larger groupings, gathering speed and force until the whole thing climaxes in a crack-the-whip line and splits again into little explosions in odd corners of the stage.

The couples—Adriane Fang and Todd Williams in blue, Netta Yerushalmy and Pourazar in purple, Desch and Charon in emerald green, and Catherine Miller and Beasant in red—have absorbed Varone's way of moving into their own differently shaped bodies. In *Rise*, they dance with a strong-backed, weighted quality that says the earth is their magnet.

The choreographer is compactly built, not too tall. He never fully stretches his dancers' bodies, so that their jutting arms and legs ray out at acute angles instead of huge extensions. He likes to set people turning outward, but always turning immediately in the opposite direction, even while traveling across the stage. His lifts and jumps tend to be straight up and cut short—not too high—and his landings are velvety, making love to the floor.

Also, he gets off on twisting the group into snarls in which the dancers, off-balance, grasp hands or legs, holding on for dear life. A pull brings a dancer from kneeling to a treacherously angled cantilever. A shift of weight leads to a dive or roll, and a whole new group shape is born. Sometimes, gorgeously, three people will step back, one by one, arch their backs and raise one arm in rough unison, a sudden convergence of the planets.

The dynamism of *Rise* bursts into an applause-inducing false ending, then decelerates. In the surprising, cooling coda, each couple returns to repeat a bit of their duet under a center spotlight on a darkened stage. Gently, a dancer tugs another into the light to repeat previous moves, but on a smaller scale, until, at the end, all eight stand spread across the stage, facing us in a loosely-gathered, but quite aware community.

The Varone company is in residence through June 26 at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs. Daily rehearsals in the college's dance studios are open and free to observers. Free programs at 7:30 PM Monday, June 21, and Friday, June 25, and at 4 PM Thursday, June 24, all in the Skidmore Dance Theater, will show company repertory and a new work in progress to J.S. Bach's *English Suites*.



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