



That Doug Varone is one shifty choreographer

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When a choreographer is tagged a "humanist," it usually means he's mawkish, but for Doug Varone, the word means what it should: His people are complicated. Slipping between commonplace gesture and metaphor, his movement occupies the ambivalent terrain of two emotions at once. It may be not be like anything you've seen before, but it makes immediate sense.

Alone onstage in the astounding 2004 ensemble piece "Castles," dancers Natalie Desch and Eddie Taketa play and fight. In an aggressive and kittenish move, Desch ducks her head under Taketa's arm, so it's resting on her shoulder. When he gets stuck in a pushup, she stretches along his body and presses him to the floor as if shutting a heavy door.

At 49, with his company enjoying its 20th anniversary, Varone is also celebrated for his flurries of motion, but all sorts of choreographers do that. The Syosset native should be clamored over instead for the way he shifts from one thing to another. Group tumult, as swift-forming as a rain cloud, gives way to the sharply etched arc of a single hand, and then to all eight dancers shunted into a scruffy chorus line of dispossession.



When a dance speaks to our hearts, we want it to finish the sentence. In "Castles," Varone satisfies that need without submitting to anything as straightforward as a storyline. The dance progresses from obsessive intensity to long-view dispassion, like Prokofiev's Waltz Suite, the music here. Keenly attentive to this richly conflicted music, Varone makes a dance as nuanced as it is kinetically thrilling.

When the music is Arvo Pärt's "Te Deum" or Philip Glass' eventually propulsive "The Light," it's one or the other - nuance or thrill. Choreographers should have to apply for a permit before they get to make yet another ballet to Pärt or Glass, as you practically can't walk into a theater without bumping into one. At least Varone knows what he's getting into.

In the new piece "Boats Leaving," he embraces Pärt's spiritualism: Dancers scoot forward on their bellies toward shafts of light from heaven. Once you accept the excess, you can enjoy the nifty particulars: the sophisticated musical round of that belly crawl, the idiosyncratic gestures complicating the many tableaux of shipwrecked souls that make up the bulk of the dance.

The most compelling element of "Lux," to the Glass, is Varone himself. Like the first lad in Jerome Robbins' "Dances at a Gathering," he enters alone to test the space's magic. He swings an arm, and follows the course of that arm with his body. He throws back his head and lets the weight of his head pull him backward. He's playing, and it's a joy to play along.

DOUG VARONE AND DANCERS. Programs A (reviewed below) and B repeat through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Ave., Manhattan. Tickets \$32 and \$42. Call 212-242-0800 or visit joyce.org. Seen Tuesday.