

The Washington Post

Varone's Bach Exercises

'Deconstructing English' Puts Emotional Pieces Together

By Sarah Kaufman

Washington Post Staff Writer

Monday, November 1, 2004; Page C05

From its title, "Deconstructing English," a work by Doug Varone that premiered over the weekend at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, sounds awfully academic, like some dusty treatise out of the field of literary criticism. Deconstruction as an artistic pursuit is stuffily postmodern, the ultimate expression of navel-gazing. Its endless peeling away of layers to get at a hidden meaning renders any such meaning meaningless through the effort to unearth it.

But Varone's deconstruction is a stylish, often witty and ultimately revealing endeavor. One of the most interesting modern dance choreographers, Varone approaches the profundities of life in a clear and distinct way. Discipline and truthfulness govern his work.



Members of Doug Varone and Dancers in "Deconstructing English" at the Clarice Smith Center. (Scott Suchman -- Clarice Smith Center)

The text Varone picks apart in "Deconstructing English" is Bach's "English Suites," a collection of exuberant and virtuosic dance tunes, which have been remixed and layered into a sound score by David Van Tieghem. There is nothing terribly surprising about this musical choice -- contemporary choreographers love baroque composers. The loose expressiveness of modern dance can look quite clever in counterpoint to the formality and stateliness of the music. But it is the way that Varone responds to the scraps of unadulterated Bach and to Van Tieghem's odd, intriguing mix-ins that is truly original.

The piece opens with a straightforward piano performance of one of the Bach suites, to which the dancers respond with a lifted-up crispness, dancing steps as light and springy as ballet, though they are not at all classical. Soon, however, other elements creep into the music -- a few plinking bars are played on a child's toy piano; other measures become blurred and twangy. At one point there is an extended solo for a cuckoo clock. At another, the music warps past the point of recognition, like a record played on slow speed. This is matched by a fragmenting of the choreography, each movement isolated and slowed. We see a blurred, slow-motion depiction

of the movement, at a slight delay, on a video screen behind the dancers. This is a wonderful image, an echo of an echo of an echo. It's also the moment when the video works best with the dancing. Other forgettable scenes, such as footage of clouds and stormy skies, were an unnecessary layer in an already rich performance.

Varone's choreography, and the movement quality he extracts from his dancers, is so nuanced, so finely detailed that he needs to take care not to upstage it with extraneous decor. The success of "Deconstructing English" stems not from the overall power of conception or from an impression of sheer kinetic force, but from something even harder to sustain: Each of its many small, quiet and often fleeting segments is engaging at an emotional level. At one point, three dancers eye one another, touch and interact in a way that is familiar and a bit longing.

They leave, replaced by a woman alone onstage doubled over in uneasy laughter. A man does a bit of a silent tap dance, the kind of showy fleet-footedness that usually demands an audience, and yet he is solo, introspective -- maybe blissful, maybe missing the others. Other vignettes flit across the stage, subtle little dramas of romantic and social dynamics. Varone has an unerring eye for evoking the authentic, and you watch his work longing for another pass at it to catch the subtleties.

The process of deconstruction is not without its perils, however. This work felt longer than its 30 minutes, growing repetitive toward the end. Its abrupt close, though, was full of delightful ambiguity. A dancer is alone onstage, and her steps ever so gradually slacken, until she is just kind of doodling around, not really dancing anymore. Similarly, the sound score is unraveling down to a last little dribble, and finally the dancer walks into the wings.

Varone kept a weekly Web log of his creative process in "Deconstructing English" that is posted on the Clarice Smith Center's Web site (www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu). This, too, is a somewhat perilous endeavor, as artists are generally more adept at making art than at talking about how they make it. Yet one can appreciate Varone's effort to deconstruct not only the Bach and the dynamics that arise when he puts dancers onstage, but also his process of creation.

Also on the program were "Castles," created earlier this year and set to a suite of Prokofiev waltzes, and "Home," a duet created 16 years ago, when his company, Doug Varone and Dancers, was new. "Castles" contained some seeds of "Deconstructing English," such as the breakups and regroupings, though with a more straightforward use of the music. "Home" was on a quieter, almost unbearably intimate scale, danced by the expertly detailed Varone and his extraordinarily riveting company member Adriane Fang. With the tiniest of gestures and telling sighs, Varone and Fang summoned up a world of frustration and disappointment between two one-time lovers, where there was no resolution but only a glowing moment of peace.