

Voice Of Dance

Force Field

Elisa Monte Dance

Monte's Pigs and Fishes, Run to the Rock, Volkmann Suite, Slope of Enlightenment, Shattered

Stanford's Memorial Auditorium, Palo Alto, CA

March 17, 2008

The Bay Area likes to think of itself as an enlightened host to touring dance companies, but occasionally a significant artist slips through the presentational net. Until Friday (March 14) at Stanford's Memorial Auditorium, New York's Elisa Monte Dance had never graced a local stage. The company certainly made up for lost time with five hard-driving works that allowed viewers little respite from choreography that seems predicated on generating enough energy to illuminate a small city. Even at those rare moments when the eight superb dancers are in the repose, the feeling of tension bubbling beneath the surface rarely disappears. The Green Movement really should take Monte seriously.

She founded her company in 1981 after extended sojourns dancing with Martha Graham, Lar Lubovitch and Pilobolus and all have left their mark without crowding her creatively. This area has seen Monte's choreography intermittently over the years. Alvin Ailey brought her *Treading* duet into his repertory and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater revived it this season. Ailey commissioned Monte's 1982 *Pigs and Fishes*, which briefly entered the San Francisco Ballet's repertory in 1984. This was the first Monte commission and encountering it again at the head of Friday's program was a bracing experience. I had never forgotten from decades ago the work's opening gambit, a woman (here, the magnificent Rachel Holmes), one stretched arm clasping the other, locomoting across the stage as if her legs were made of lead. You can feel the sensation of weight in every flip across the stage.

Monte's capacity for conveying a rootedness seems almost infinite, though sometimes, the sensation seems all that the piece is about, at least in this early work. Still, the torsos thrust into space, the greedy descents to the floor, the scooping arms, dramatically sweeping extensions, the grinding contemporary music, the avid devouring of space and the transitory groupings signal a style. Fortunately, this Stanford Lively Arts presentation ranged over a quarter century of endeavor and Monte's 2007 *Slope of Enlightenment* fuses all these elements.

You might call this a quest piece, and an affecting one, too. The protagonist (Andre Zachery) wanders through the landscape, evocatively lit by Clifton Taylor, encountering all manner of obstacle. Women taunt him and another man (Werner Figar) wrestles, caresses and guides our hero until he achieves some kind of identity breakthrough. With the members of the ensembles sauntering on and off and posing like monoliths, the piece achieves the quality of a life journey. The commissioned score by jazz musician Richard Bennett (to which have been added a series of natural sounds) does the job in this compelling work.

Monte's dancers possess a definite look. The men are muscular (and, more often than not, seen bare-chested). The women are sinewy and their costumes accentuate their undraped legs. Monte explores the dancer's narcissism in the clever *Volkmann Suite* (1996), an homage to dance photographer Roy Volkmann. We are in a photo studio, in which the three dancers (Joseph Celej, Matthew Fisher, Tiffany Rea), pose, rearrange themselves and pose again, under the scrutiny of harsh, unblinking studio lights, all this to the piquant sound of Michael Nyman's Quartet No. 3 (heard, like everything else, via recording). Monte's note alludes to the sculpture of Rodin, but, as the piece makes clear, dancers define themselves by the way in which they move, and the piece explores the permutations of the trio with considerable deftness.

Shattered (2000) arrives with another industrial score (this one, by Michael Gordon) and its format is marked by the opening and closing clusters, with all eight dancers (India Bolds and Maya Taylor join the others) caught in a strobe-lit lightning storm. Monte structures the work with an eye to contrasting solo outings and group forays. The arms curl into fists and they fix themselves to mouth, palms flash and the dancers struggle for order as they leap through space and assemble in straight lines, which soon yield to less organized patterns. The tone is volatile, even explosive; the dancing is never less than stunning.

By

Allan Ulrich

© VoiceofDance.com 2008