

At 25, a Company Mixes Rigor With Emotion (and Kinetic Virtuosity)



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Elisa Monte Dance is celebrating its 25th anniversary, though it was called Monte/Brown for a while, when David Brown shared the artistic directorship. On Tuesday night the company, back under the sole control of Ms. Monte for the last four years, opened the fall season at the Joyce Theater with a run, through Sunday. It was impressive, especially in the second half.

Ms. Monte has an eclectic background, having danced with the Martha Graham company, Lar Lubovitch, Pilobolus and others. She likes formalism and she likes humanistic expression. She evokes rigorous patterns yet leavens them with the theatrical emotionality of earlier modern dance. Above all she loves intricate leaps and lifts and knotty combinations of bodies.

Add to that an octet of fine dancers, handsome lighting (mostly by Clifton Taylor) and a strong feeling for alluring new music, and you have the ingredients for a fine evening of dance.

Those ingredients came together most satisfactorily after intermission. In the first half “Day’s Residue” (2000), to evocative neo-Baroque music by the Slovakian composer Vladimir Godar, and “Hardwood,” a world premiere to music by John King, were characterized by sculptural groupings and slightly effortful execution. They were appealing but seemed a little workaday and anonymous.

All that changed with “Volkman Suite” (1996) and “Shattered” (2001). Three-quarters of the program used the full complement of eight dancers; maybe Ms. Monte feels more comfortable with patterns than with the evocation of individual personality. But “Volkman Suite,” inspired by Roy Volkman’s dance photography, is for a trio.

I cannot say show effective it was in earlier years, although it was well received, but now it is really stunning. The two principal dancers, Tiffany Rea and Matthew Fisher, joined the company only recently. He is strong, almost stolid, but powerfully so; she is quick, darting, daring. Fabrice Lamego, who filled out the trio, was a vivid presence too, but the dance is really about the main couple.

Making use of some particularly pungent music by Michael Nyman, this is, in the words of the program note, a “‘Rodinesque’ ode to dance,” but with no loss of kinetic energy and intensity between the two leads. Whatever its sources, this is not photography and not sculpture, but dance.

“Shattered” matches the driving, alternately pounding and nervously hushed music of Michael Gordon with a seemingly ceaseless flow of energy. Ms. Monte’s choreography may lack the last degree of nonstop intensity of, say, Twyla Tharp’s, but it comes close enough. And within the restless group dancing of the eight, individuals and couples do emerge, especially the tireless, prominently featured Ms. Rea and Mr. Fisher.

