

Dance Theatre of Harlem: New York City repertory season

May 15, 2014

The Rose Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York, NY; April 24 & 25, 2014

April 24: *New Bach, Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven, Contested Space*
April 25: *Pas de Dix, past-carry-forward, Gloria*

Jerry Hochman



Dance Theater of Harlem in Robert Garland's 'Gloria'. Photo © Matthew Murphy

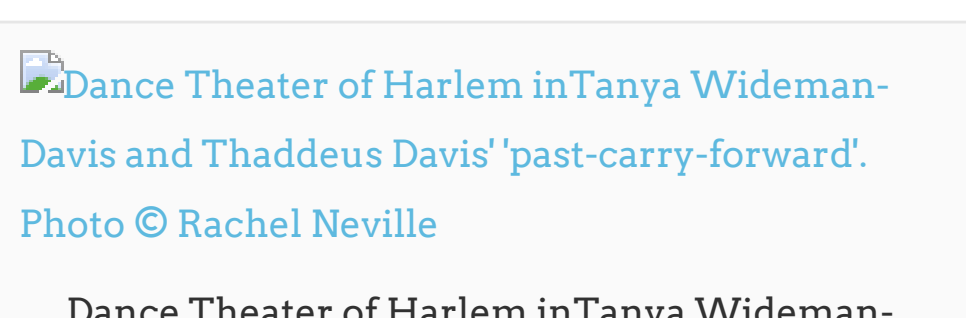
I have vivid memories of seeing Dance Theatre of Harlem when I first began attending ballet performances. Under the visionary tutelage of its Artistic Director Arthur Mitchell, New York City Ballet's first African-American principal dancer who, together with Karel Shook, co-founded the company in 1969, DTH accomplished what then seemed unimaginable – it presented black ballet dancers who looked and danced like 'real' ballet dancers, performing a classical and neoclassical ballet repertoire which included "Firebird", "Agon", and most memorably to me, "Giselle" (also known as "Creole Giselle"). It's most well-known principal ballerina was Virginia Johnson, whom I saw dance the lead in "Giselle" at City Center when the piece premiered, and one of its finest male dancers was Robert Garland.

Fast forward, and DTH is back at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater for its second season since it resumed performing following an approximately ten year hiatus. Ms. Johnson is now Artistic Director, Mr. Garland is now the company's Resident Choreographer, and Mr. Mitchell is Artistic Director Emeritus. While the ballets on last week's programs were not uniformly successful, this matters less than the impression the company makes through its dancers, and in this regard DTH's rebirth is particularly remarkable.

Of the six dances presented, by far the most consistent with the DTH I remember, and the most successful of the engagement, were the revival of "Pas de Dix", and the two pieces created by Mr. Garland: "New Bach" and "Gloria". But the dance that was the most ambitious in scope, and for that reason particularly disappointing that it isn't the blockbuster it might have been, is "past-carry-forward," which was given its New York premiere on Wednesday. Choreographed by Tanya Wideman-Davis (a former DTH dancer) and Thaddeus Davis, both of whom are on the faculty of the University of South Carolina and co-Artistic Directors of Wideman/Davis Dance, the piece's individual components are clearly expressed (even where abstract), but the parts don't gel, and the potential impact is lost.

"past-carry-forward" attempts to chronicle and comment on the "Great Migration" of African-Americans from the agrarian South to the industrial North during the early 1900s to find better life. To address this comprehensively, the ballet examines the relocation through a series of choreographed snapshots of representative situations in which the migrant blacks found themselves (the first 'part' of the piece), and then by examining the collective and individual impact of the prejudice and racism they encounter (the second 'part').

In its first part, "past-carry-forward" is segmented into discrete sub-sections illustrative of selective components of the migration. A couple is shown, suitcases at their sides, leaving family and familiar surroundings to venture into the unknown. This segues into a representation of the 'Harlem Renaissance', showing migrant African-Americans having a grand time at what might have been a common gathering place catering predominantly to them (a specific location isn't identified, but it's pictured as a nightclub-type place that might have been inspired by the Cotton Club). It's a wonderfully-choreographed segment, but its significance in the overall context is unclear.



Dance Theater of Harlem in Tanya Wideman-Davis and Thaddeus Davis' 'past-carry-forward'. Photo © Rachel Neville

Following this scene, the first part then continues with a visualization of three 'demeaning' occupations into which the immigrant African-Americans were pigeon-holed: serving in the segregated military, performing for white folks in the segregated entertainment industry, and becoming railroad Pullman porters carrying other peoples' (presumably white peoples') luggage. With the exception of the 'military' segment, which to me failed to deliver its message, each of these is nicely done.

But then, in the second section, the ballet abruptly changes its approach, abandoning 'factual' representations in favor of an extended abstract dance intended to capture the feelings of alienation, anomie, ennui, and purposelessness suffered by each individual immigrant, and the immigrant African-Americans collectively, because of the prejudice and racism that they encountered. The section is amorphous and goes on much too long, but there's a commonality, a universality, to suffering regardless of the outrageousness of its particular cause, and this part of the ballet creates a psychological profile that leaves an impact in some ways similar to the psychological impact of Stalinist tyranny explored, in more concrete fashion, in the first two parts of Alexei Ratmansky's "Shostakovich Trilogy". The problem is that these individual parts don't fit together, and consequently, despite the strengths of individual segments and the strong performances of the nine-dancer cast (Lindsay Croop, Emiko Flanagan, Ashley Murphy, Janelle Figgins, Chrystyn Fenroy, Darius Barnes, Anthony Savoy, Samuel Wilson, and Da'Von Doane), the piece as a whole appears unfocused and muddy.



Dance Theater of Harlem in 'Pas de Dix' Photo © University of Utah

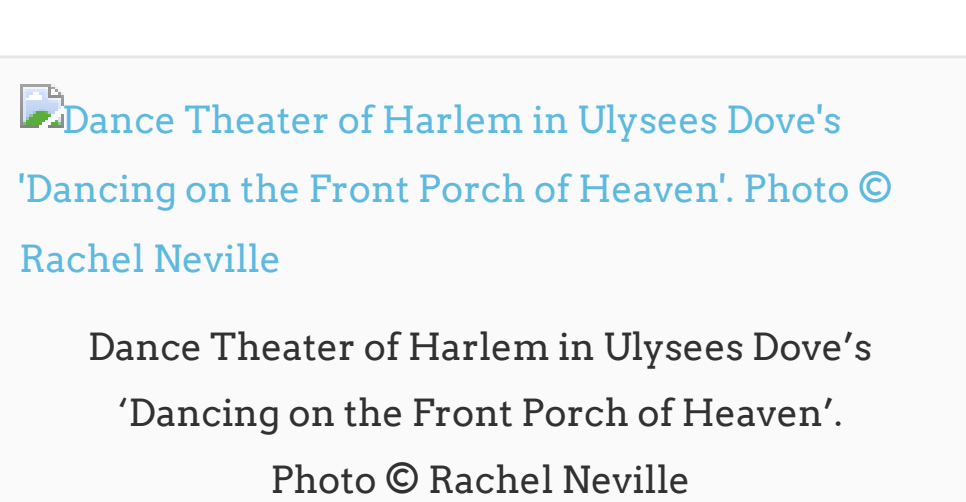
"Pas de Dix" is a series of dances excerpted from the last act of Marius Petipa's "Raymonda". It was originally staged for DTH in 1983 by the late Frederic Franklin, and this restaging by Ms. Johnson, Keith Saunders, and Kellye A. Saunders is dedicated to him. Excerpts or not, "Pas de Dix" is not an easy piece to dance. The choreography is precise, and there's no place for the dancer to hide – it's either executed cleanly or it's not. Generally the DTH dancers handled the difficult assignment very well – it was a particular stretch for the four supporting men in the Third Variation – but it was a challenge that was right for them to assay. Stylistically, the Slavic/Hungarian remnants from the original were executed

mechanically, and the piece suffered from a total absence of context characterization, but this appears to have been the consequence of an intentional effort in the restaging to eliminate 'extraneous references' and to distill the piece to its 'classical purity'. In other words – it wasn't the dancers' fault.

Ms. Murphy and Mr. Doane led the cast. Except for one minor flub toward the end (which he brushed off with an engaging grin), Mr. Doane did a fine job. Ms. Murphy, however, who is a remarkably strong dancer, looked like a deer caught in the headlights through much of the piece, as if she was petrified. But I didn't see it as fear – I saw it as concentration; she was working very hard to get the steps right, and didn't relax and begin to smile until it was nearly over. Regardless, and aside from consistently descending too hard off pointe, she executed the tough assignment very well. All the supporting dancers performed their solo variations competently, but two stood out: Ingrid Silva in the First Variation delivered a sweetly nuanced and sublimely cute First Variation, and Nayana Lopes danced a vivacious and self-assured Second Variation. Ms. Lopes was scheduled to dance the Black Swan Pas de Deux Saturday afternoon. Based on her performance in "Pas de Dix", I regret being unable to see it.

Of Mr. Garland's two dances, "Gloria" was the more ambitious, and the more satisfying. Choreographed to Francis Poulenc's 1961 composition and enhanced by the purity of Pamela Allen-Cummings's costumes, it's a ballet of simple virtues expressed with celebratory spirituality and reverential optimism. It also accomplishes many of the company's needs within the context of classical ballet framework. By that I mean that Mr. Garland seamlessly weaves a distinctive African-American accent – swinging torsos, and loose 'soft shoe' movement, for example – into classic ballet vocabulary, thereby presenting not only an unusually entertaining work, but also demonstrating that for DTH to be distinctively African-American a transition from 'classical' (or 'neoclassical') to 'contemporary' ballet is not required. And he also integrates students from the DTH School Cabriole Program into the ballet (all of whom added to the festive quality of the piece), thereby building, and insuring, a steady stream of student relatives to future performances. It sounds mendacious, and may not have been Mr. Garland's intent, but it's a strategy that's helped keep many companies financially afloat.

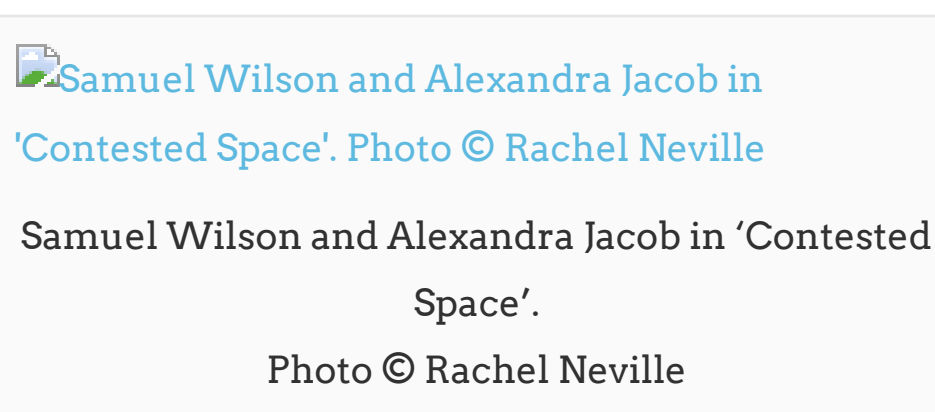
Mr. Garland's other piece, "New Bach", which opened the April 24 program, is not as strong as "Gloria" only because it's less meaningful. Although "New Bach" superficially resembles Balanchine pieces in its basic appearance, it's a fine piece of work that integrates a jazzy contemporary sensibility with neoclassical form, and grafts both onto a Baroque musical framework. Mr. Davis and a particularly vibrant Ms. Croop led the ten dancer cast. Although it's not a particularly remarkable piece, "New Bach" is a fine opener that displays the company well.



Dance Theater of Harlem in Ulysees Dove's 'Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven'. Photo © Rachel Neville

The remaining two ballets, both of which were on the April 24 program, were considerably less noteworthy. "Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven" (subtitled, 'Odes to Love and Loss'), made in 1993 for the Royal Swedish Ballet, had its DTH premiere last fall. While there is no question of Mr. Dove's emotional commitment (the piece is a reflection on the loss of 13 of his friends and relatives in a short period of time) or that of three women and three men who performed it, the dance is strangely strident. It opens and closes with the dancers in a circle center stage (a recurring stage image throughout the course of the piece), from which dancers pore off to individualized (solo, couples, trios) expressions. There is a superficial relationship here to Antony Tudor's "Dark Elegies", but although the movement quality in Mr. Dove's piece is more streamlined and powerfully emphatic, befitting its more contemporary style, it carries less emotional weight. This is not so much bereavement as anger, expressed both inward, perhaps as some sort of expression of self-punishment, and outward at how these tragedies could have been allowed to happen.

"Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven" is stunning to look at (the dancers wear white unitards, and the stage is dark but for beams of light within which most of the movement takes place), but it's repetitious, and all at the same decibel level – much like the Arvo Part score ("Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten") to which it's choreographed. But where the score is mournful, interspersed with 'gongs' that can be sensed as cries of despair, the dance was more monochromatic. I was particularly perplexed by the repeated use of an image of the dancers squatting, legs spread apart at 180 degrees, the women on pointe. This deep plié appears inconsistent with any sense of bereavement, withdrawal, acceptance, or even anger or submission to a superior being's will. Although I appreciated the anger, I couldn't feel it. The ballet was excellently danced by Ms. Silva, Ms. Murphy, Ms. Figgins, Mr. Doane, Mr. Wilson, and Dustin James.



Samuel Wilson and Alexandra Jacob in 'Contested Space'. Photo © Rachel Neville

"Contested Space," Donald Byrd's first piece for DTH, premiered in 2012. The program note describes it as "an exploration of contemporary couplings and relationships, examined through the lens of a 21st-century post-neoclassical sensibility." Translated, it's a contemporary ballet about relationships, which is filled with hypercharged dancing and excellent

performances, but which is cold as ice – which may be its point. Choreographed to a score by Brazilian composer Amon Tobin that sounds like a collection of street sounds and a manufacturing plant's monotonous background noise, the piece is filled with ballet vocabulary interspersed with vernacular shrugs, shimmies, and forward body thrusts that are executed perfectly but that look awkward. All the dancers (Ms. Williams, Ms. Murphy, Alexandra Jacob, Ms. Figgins, Ms. Silva, Francis Lawrence, Mr. Doane, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Davis, and Anthony Savoy) performed remarkably well, but I particularly appreciated the work of Ms. Williams and Mr. Lawrence, and Ms. Jacob and Mr. Wilson.

The two programs evidence a company wrestling with creating an identity that will carry it into its next 45 years. What direction DTH will go in, or whether it must go in any particular direction, is not yet knowable. But with its core of strong dancers and its Artistic Director's vision, another 45 years is not an unreasonable expectation.

Jerry Hochman talks to DTH Artistic Director Virginia Johnson

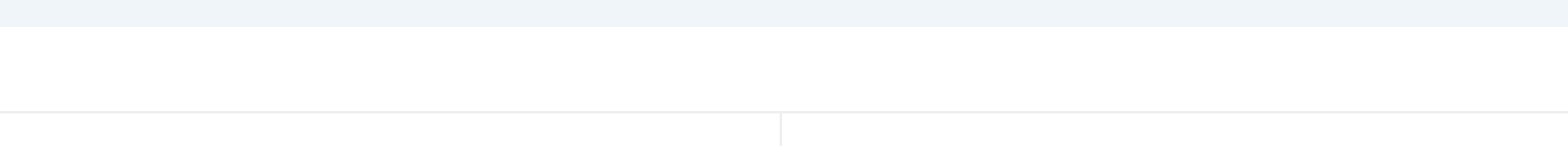
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