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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Chouinard #5: Ballet on Hyperdrive

by Lisa Kraus

I'm always curious what will happen when a singular performer makes work for a big troupe. Which qualities will s/he pass along? Some twenty-five years after I first saw her nearly nude, painted red, in the guise of an aroused goddess, Marie Chouinard has fully transferred her feral sensuality to her 10-strong company.

Both works in Dance Celebration's presentation of Compagnie Marie Chouinard set unlikely movement and images to iconic music.

24 Preludes by Chopin (1999), with its piano score ranging from dark to sparkling, gives Chouinard a palette with which to paint a changing parade of sections. Lights up – the dancers in stillness come to life through the slightest trembling of their hands. Men wear sheer black briefs and women see-through body stockings with strips of shiny tape masking genitals and the women's nipples. They angle their weight slightly forward en masse - space alien dancers, bowing.

In succeeding sections, fast foot work with precise unison, upright clean placements and demanding jump sequences are skewered through fragmentation. Without accustomed flow, and with relentless repetition, it's ballet on hyperdrive. The dancers move too with flattened hands angled at the wrists, with currents rippling through their torsos, or floppily, shifting each other from place to place like bobbing dolls. In a spectacular strobe-lit section three women each circle one arm, propeller-style, pausing momentarily at the horizontal. It's a visual composition that's kinetic - a danced sculpture.

Black outs separate the sections; scenes spring into life in circumscribed pools of light. Single images pile one on another: A marching cadre repeatedly absorbs a soloist who sputters out solfège syllables--la-ti-fa-so-mi-fa--with increasing urgency. Each dancer in a line lifts a petite woman in turn, in perfect synchronicity with Chopin's cadences.

Rite of Spring (1993) has been seen around the world, and with good reason, as Chouinard's channeling of animal instincts is well-matched to the forward propulsion of Stravinsky's score. At its close the dancers are drenched, having put out energetically and emotionally, and the audience is largely thrilled.

Referencing Nijinsky's original *Rite* in its two-dimensional frieze-like forms and choral patterns, it leaves behind the original narrative of a sacrificial murder. With antlers as a costume element and horns as a prop standing in for phalluses or weapons, this *Rite* piles on one cruel or sybaritic scene after another, unhitched from a narrative thread. Like music played loud, if you're into it, great. But if it loses you, it becomes a dense wash of intensity without a handhold.

Compagnie Marie Chouinard, *24 Preludes by Chopin* and *Rite of Spring*, in the Dance Celebration Series presented by Dance Affiliates and the Annenberg Center, December 8-10. No further performances.

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December 14, 2011