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Chouinard #2: Too Much of a Good Thing?

by Julie Diana

No doubt about it: Compagnie Marie Chouinard proved to be a first rate company at the Annenberg Center last weekend. Its ten dancers performed Chouinard's two one-act ballets with great strength and attack. They threw themselves into the choreography and whipped through each phrase like demonic beasts. Their energy and drive stunned me. It's just too bad Chouinard didn't mix it up a bit. So much of the same dynamic got old – fast.

The two pieces on the program, Chouinard's *24 Preludes by Chopin* and *The Rite of Spring*, could be sister works. Both ballets had the same black scrim and stark spot lighting. Dancers wore versions of the same Vandal costumes; starting the night almost naked in cropped mesh unitards and returning after intermission bare chested with shorts. They sported punky hair and red eye make-up for both pieces. Theme animal movements struck me as wild and strange, but the dancers repeated them too often to create much of an impact.

The dancers were not at fault. Their superb lines, intense gazes and pliant backs captured my imagination. I often pictured their human forms to be crazed animals that strutted, fluttered, squirmed and clawed. A man's hands became Chopin's piano keys as he stood hunched in the spot light. A woman lip synched a monologue then stood teary and breathless, on the verge of a breakdown. The dancers' faces never lacked expression, whether it was an eerie smile or an open mouthed, audible gasp. I felt tired yet impressed watching all of them push through both ballets. Chouinard used the entire company in each piece, another example of "sameness" that marked the night.

Perhaps the matinee program was a better pairing: A solo titled *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* and *24 Preludes by Chopin*. But the titles of these pieces (both "Preludes") hint otherwise. Like her choreography and stage direction, Chouinard burdens her work with overuse. This sameness kills her message, and even the dancers can't save it.

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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