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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Chouinard #3: Marie Chouinard's Creatures

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Wearing black bathing suits, red eye make-up, and hair-dos that brought to mind tentacles or caterpillars, Chouinard's ten dancers gasped, writhed, spoked, stamped, and slithered through the company's impassioned performance at Annenberg's Dance Celebration on Friday, December 9th. The first work was danced to 24 Preludes by Chopin, the second to Stravinsky's Rite of Spring—both, alas, recorded.

24 Preludes (1999) often highlighted a soloist against a chorus, with sharply etched circles or slices of light, designed by Axel Morgenthaler, isolating the one dancer or clusters. The choreography exposed dramatic heights and depths in Chopin's richly varied piano preludes. In one striking moment, the music ceased and a woman came forward to speak her unintelligible but urgent story directly to us, only to be silenced by a herd of creatures stampeding her off stage. She returned to her downstage spotlight again and again, whipped up to the point of hysteria, only to be swept off each time until, in her final attempt, she could barely muster a syllable. All the while, in a dimmer light upstage, another woman seamlessly danced the speaker's despair.

Again, in Chouinard's Rite (1993), a soloist often danced against a chorus, with sharply etched lighting, here designed by Chouinard, sculpting the charged, complex movement. The vocabulary was not noticeably distinct from that for 24 Preludes, but the costumes were, somewhat: women were topless, wearing the same bathing suits as the men, with occasional props of stylized tentacles, horns, or phalluses. Imagine Nijinsky's erotic, angular, asymmetrical movement projected a hundred years forward from his time, and you see the evolution of Chouinard's vocabulary. Alas, her frankly copulative movement shocks the audience less today than did Nijinsky's suggestive allusions a century ago. What Chouinard did not grasp was Nijinsky's effective use of narrative; her Rite unfolded in vignettes of thrust, fight, struggle, climax, recoil, and ecstatic climax again – and again and again.

The dancers were, without exception, creatures of remarkable technique, bodies honed from foot to face, utterly committed and courageous in expression. I'm glad I saw Compagnie Marie Chouinard last night. I'm not sure I need to see them again.

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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