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Unsettling Weather

By: GUS SOLOMONS JR
02/10/2009

The austere concrete walls of the handsome Baryshnikov Arts Center in Hell's Kitchen provide an appropriate setting for Liz Gerring's architecturally rigorous movement -- phrases that send her and three other dancers lurching through the space, adorning neatly geometric paths with dynamically detailed motion in her 50-minute "Montauk."



Elizabeth DeMent and Tony Neidenbach in Liz Gerring's "Montauk" at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. JULIETA CERVANTES

Titled for the Long Island resort, the piece, performed February 5 to 8, distills memories of place and experience into physically intense yet restrained gestures and phrases that sometimes show their literal roots -- walking in the sand, tossing a Frisbee -- but never become pantomimic or narrative. The dancers maintain an impassive but highly focused demeanor during their intensely physical activity. Emotion is implied merely by proximity, dynamics, and juxtaposition.

The choreographer's unerring intelligence at organizing her powerful movement motifs is palpable. Strong, linear geometric patterns in space organize rhythmic foot patterns that have the buoyant lilt of folk dance. Simple, unmannered movement masks its technical challenge, but galvanizes the dancers' concentration and energizes their unaffected dancing.

The personal relationships in the continuous duets and trios, among Elizabeth DeMent, Jessica Weiss, Tony Niedenbach, and occasionally Gerring, remain open to interpretation. When Niedenbach rushes in to assist Gerring in a fall or a lift, as he frequently does, he becomes a caregiver. DeMent and Weiss dancing side by side might be sisters, rivals, friends, or even strangers. Gerring and DeMent, linked hand in hand, suggest parent and child.

Even though everyone wears dark blue/gray -- women in matching dresses, man in pants and shirt, each with a charcoal stripe on the bodice (by long-time collaborator Deanna Berg) -- and they sometimes move in unison, their individual personalities remain vivid. Gerring's lexicon of weighted lunges, rolling falls, fleeting foot patterns, and grazing lifts seem too simple to be so startlingly original. Her artistically mature dancers invest every move with total conviction.

Weiss leans into Niedenbach as if he were a wall. Then she supports him as he hinges backward to the floor. In one especially sensuous duet, Weiss and DeMent in unison pitch forward, extending a leg diagonally backward, then shoot erect with a torso ripple; they lunge and embrace their bent front legs but do not actually touch them.

Seth Nehil's atmospheric sound score amplifies the implicit drama with electronic roars, gurgles, and chirps, and lighting designer Carolyn Wong shifts the weather in the room from overcast to sunny, chilly to torrid, intimate to expansive.

Four big hanging panels, which remain illuminated throughout, comprise the rear wall. Designed by Italian visual artist Vittoria Chierici, they are photomurals of the dancers in summer whites, walking away. In a progression from left to right, the photos bleed into line drawings -- from calf height to waist high. The farthest right panel is a full photograph.

As the dancers hopscotch through the darkening twilight of the space, the lights click out on the panels, one by one, leaving us in the dark to ponder the magically moving encounter we've just experienced.

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