

The Parsons Dance Company: Luminescent theatricality or hodgepodge?

By Andrea Peters
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The Parsons Dance Company, currently nearing the end of a performance series at the Joyce Theater in New York City, is one of the leading companies in the world of mainstream contemporary modern dance. Critics have accused the ensemble, the brainchild of David Parsons, a former dancer with the Paul Taylor Co., of being flashy. While this is one notable aspect of the group's work, I would argue that Parsons' innovative theatricality is the most creative feature of this young artist. More substantively, however, the work the company is performing at the Joyce Theater suffers from other difficulties—above all, the inability to create a unified whole out of various complex formal tools. Parsons' work also clearly bears the mark of much current choreography—an overemphasis on technical virtuosity, coupled with an unsophisticated exploration of multifaceted themes or its absence altogether.

Program A of the Joyce Theater shows begins with a work choreographed in 1993, *Unison*. A full ensemble piece, the dance centers around a contact movement sequence with the dancers in a circle of light. The bodies flow seamlessly together, melting in and out of each other. At various moments two figures arrive in the same place, always by different methods, serving to break up the constant motion. As quickly as they join together they shift apart. The use of the bodies in space is well orchestrated. As limb and backs slip into strange angles, the dancers' slow supported movements and mutual weight bearing never appears stilted.

However—and this is a recurring problem with Parsons' choreography in this program—the different components of the piece were not well tied together. The beginning and end—dancers moving across stage in a staggered formation stretching into the space with lunges and arched backs—while pretty, appeared tacked

on; there is no apparent impetus for moving in and out of the center stage cluster. The lack of shape development and the unchanging dynamic made the transitions somewhat random. However, the rising and falling sequencing and the supple nature of the movement were rather beautiful.

Jazz Chance was an improvisational piece involving the jazz musicians (from the Phil Woods Little Big Band), who accompany the works in the first half of the program, and four randomly selected dancers. The musicians did an excellent job of interacting with their moving counterparts. The exchange between music and movement was entertaining and effective. However, what was noticeable about the dancers was the incredible tension with which they moved, all of them exuding a similar quality. It seemed that certain of the dancers were so totally trained in a movement style and method of sequencing that they could not break out of it.

Fill the Woods With Light and *Caught* deserve particular attention because of their signature aesthetic, an unconventional use of lighting that serves to illuminate the dancers and at the same time occupies its own place in the performance.

In the former, the creative use of light in the stage space yielded interesting effects; the dancers, with multiple lights attached to their bodies or holding lamps, provided their own stage lights. The shadows produced on the dancers themselves and in the space, as well as the moving points of light, so effectively redefined the stage environment that it appeared miraculously transformed. The piece as whole, unfortunately, was totally lacking in any well conceived structure. It felt more as if a series of individual images had been strung together without any prior concept except that individually each looked

good. Choreographically the work was not particularly interesting or innovative, continually using a frontal focus.

Parsons' *Caught* is almost universally known in the dance world for its ingenuity and rigor. By the use of strobe light, perfectly timed and coordinated with the continuous jumping motions of a solo figure on stage, the audience perceives the illusion of someone floating through the air. The dancer is suspended in space as a timeless figure. However, *Caught* exhibits difficulties similar to those in the rest of the company's works. It has no structure to support it. The brilliant tools used by Parsons serve only themselves. Overall, I found the piece to be disjointed.

The artistic logic that produced a certain superficiality in *Fill the Woods With Light* and *Caught* was expressed in different ways in other pieces. In *Brothers*, two men are supposed to be exploring the relationship after which the piece is titled. Unfortunately, the work is not extraordinarily perceptive; it flattens the complexities and richness inherent to the relationship between brothers. The choreography reverts to a comfortable vocabulary, instead of being organically connected to the theme of the work. When compared to pieces by other artists also exploring universal personal experiences, such as Doug Varone's *Home*, the work is weak.

Anthem, the closing piece of the program, was equally disappointing. The piece was mannered in the worst way. Costumed and choreographed with military overtones, the dancers are equipped with sticks that have scarves (large and small) of different colors attached to them. Individuals take turns leading various numbers of their fellow dancers across the stage, scarves in hand. Two dancers engage in a mock battle scene. The full ensemble, dancing in a balletic style, dances about in triumph. At times the work was reminiscent of some sort of rhythmic gymnastic display. In the middle of the piece a couple performs a duet. The dancing of the couple is over the top. Like *Brothers*, nothing out of the ordinary comes across in Parson's artistic expression of a love relationship between two people.

Overall, what is striking about Parson's choice of body motions is their frontal orientation and uprightness. Parson's choreography, outside of *Unison* perhaps, lacked a fuller engagement of the torso.

Accordingly, the movement vocabulary was highly one-dimensional. The Parsons Dance Company is a group of highly technically trained and skilled dancers, but the choreography gives their performance an unfortunately narcissistic quality.

Without a doubt, Parsons' work is much more preoccupied with theatrical experimentation than anything else—fashioning wonders for the audience. This is not inherently wrong or bad. Nonetheless, one must ask—to what purpose? Without some sort of larger framework, theatrical ingenuity can only serve an artistic hodgepodge.

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