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Making the Downtown Scene. . - New York - Dance Theater Workshop Around Town series - dance review

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Making the Downtown Scene The Duke on 42nd Street New York, New York
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Dance Theater Workshop is renovating its home on West 19th Street in New York City, and will be programming again in October 2002. However, a monthlong series of concerts at the Duke on 42nd Street--DTW Around Town--proves that, even though temporarily nomadic, DTW remains the bellwether of New York dance. The artists chosen for the series stand at various phases of their careers and make work about an array of compositional and thematic concerns, yet all display the diversity of style that has become known as "Downtown."

The standout of the 2001 series was Bebe Miller's *Verge*. Following its premiere last year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Verge* received three New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Awards: for choreography (Miller), lights and set (designed by Michael Mazzola and Scott Pask, respectively), and music (Hahn Rowe). *Verge* shows that Miller's artistry is at its vibrant height. More than a theatrical coup, the work brimmed with wisdom.

The set--a swath of living grass behind a rigid, melancholy fragment of architecture that resembled Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico's surreal cityscapes--cast the dancers as animals in a human zoo or pieces on a metaphysical game board. Their phrase material grew from the intimacy of touch into awkward, sprawling steps that crowded the stage. Repetitive text fragments, written by Talvin Wilks, became an existential argument and transcended specific issues of personhood to express primal human relationships. Dancers Ted Johnson, Darrell Jones, Angie Hauser Robinson, and Melissa Wynn used this language like a bludgeon against themselves and each other, then seemed to remember words of politesse and etiquette. Naoko Nagata, who designed costumes for three of the presentations in this series, added elegant texture and color to the

cool space.

Doug Elkins also investigated the struggle for human connection in his *The Look of Love*, but in a much lighter vein. Elkins has lost the deadpan of his early works, like 1991's *Where Was Yvonne Rainer When I Had Saturday Night Fever?* He relies on a tumbling, playful braggadocio to explore the emotional risks of falling in and out of love.

Fritha Pengelly's performance in *Love* was remarkably assured; she seems the essential Elkins gamine. The humor in the piece is broad and generous. Elkins spun a seemingly endless stream of movement invention--rambunctious tossing and turning that often suggested a tussle under the sheets. The nostalgic AM radio sound of Burt Bacharach accompanied this frolicsome synthesis of snaky street style and studio epaulement, building to an encore of Dionne Warwick's "I Say a Little Prayer for You." By this time, all seven dancers had become old friends. Clearly, the pleasure of breaking up is making up.

Like slow-simmered rage, Ellis Wood's *Funktionslust Slut* arrived with a barrage of sound. Leslie Johnson, Michelle LaRue, Jennifer Phillips, Kristine Willis, and Wood, in coy black cocktail dresses, swaggered like supermodels down a catwalk or like triumphant athletes in a smack-down wrestling arena. Embodying feminist anger within a percussive and willfully clumsy vocabulary, limbs thrown to the floor like pieces of meat, Wood also managed to be laceratingly funny. She inserted text into the work with a surgeon's precision and proved that revenge is not a dish best savored when cold. As two competing dancers steamed with overtly sexual inner heat, one purred, "I'm so hot!" Later she repeated several times, "I want it now!" The dancers become maenads, Valkyries, attacking their material with tremendous force while Daniel Bernard Roumain's score soared from wah-wah pedal guitar to tender violin.

Sharing a program with Wood, Lisa Race performed a short solo, *Three Wishes*, that introduced her signature physicality. Part contact improv-based, partially derived from gymnastics, the effortless partnering that comprises Race's quartet *Social Climb* combines miraculous lift-work in intricate permutations. Against a sky-blue background with fluffy white clouds, Nagata's costumes were plushly beautiful. Each of the four dancers--Anna Sofia Kallinikidou, Paul Matteson, Jennifer Nugent, and Mark Stuver--came forward to tell a story, spun from a thread of climbing or overcoming obstacles, before crouching to absorb more

virtuosic couplings.

Complementarily paired on another program, Maura Nguyen Donohue and Patricia Hoffbauer both used issues of specific hyphenated identity (Donohue was born in Vietnam; Hoffbauer in Brazil) to create cross-cultural, uniquely New York stories about roots. Both pieces also acknowledged the events of September 11. In Donohue's *Both*, dancers frequently fell to the floor. In Hoffbauer's *Over My Dead Body*, the four cast members took turns playing dead, but not before Francisco Rider da Silva delivered a very funny monologue among animal sounds and poses of herding cows.

Both began with Donohue dangling from bungee cords. Another figure tossed and spun her while reciting spare poetry; dancers filled the space with yoga asanas. A contemplative duet (choreographed by Peggy Cheng), danced and sung by Tom Lee and Marina Celandier, maintained a similar dream- or ritual-like quality. In an impressive use of multimedia by Brian Nishii/Westwell Productions, a stream of video images projected onto a dancer's pregnant belly reminded us all the potential *e pluribus unum* holds for a fractured world.

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