

October 14, 2005

Dance Review | Bebe Miller

# Charm, Mystery, Disorientation: When Cultures Collide

By JOHN ROCKWELL

It's curious, and probably inexplicable, how some dancing leaves you cold, while other dancing, which might sound similar described in mere words, strikes you to the heart. Bebe Miller's "Landing/Place," which opened a five-performance run on Wednesday at Dance Theater Workshop, was just wonderful: I loved almost every bit.

Why? Well, for one thing Ms. Miller, who worked with her regular dramaturge, Talvin Wilks, has a quintet of absolutely wonderful dancers: Kathleen Fisher, Darrell Jones, Angie Hauser, Kathleen Hermesdorf and David Thomson. They are mature, which is not a code word for old but means they have dimensionality and personality, aside from being able to contribute to the choreography and move in constantly captivating ways.

All the varied elements of the piece were strong and fit together strongly. Vita Berezina-Blackburn's animations looked sometimes too childlike for my taste but at other times powerful, and Maya Ciarrocchi's videos, also in black and white, were strangely evocative, especially the open window with the blowing curtain at the beginning. Michael

Mazzola's lighting was powerfully stark. And Albert Mathias's music sounded constantly engaging, improvised on a slide guitar on his lap with admixtures of recorded dialogue and ambient sound, Verdi opera and the voice of Gigi, the joyful Ethiopian singer.

"Landing/Place" supposedly has to do with the disorientation, the questioning of identity, occasioned by confrontations with exotic cultures. That all came into focus toward the end, with a charming depiction of street encounters in Eritrea.

But this is not a piece about just charm. What makes Ms. Miller's choreography so moving are the sudden moments of mystery, how dancers in midflight will abruptly stop and stare into the far distance at something only they can see. Then they snap back into their solos or duets or group patterns, which are always sinuous and sexy, coolly thoughtful yet dispatched with consummate ease.

Ms. Miller has been based outside New York for four years, in residencies hither and yon and teaching at Ohio State. Her return, for her company's 20th anniversary, was both a celebration and a cause for celebration.

"Landing/Place" continues tonight at 7:30 and 10 and tomorrow night at 7:30 at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 924-0077.