



Working It Out

From Fidel With Love and Other Stories

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Angie Hauser Robinson and Ted Johnson in Bebe Miller's *Verge*

Even if the program for Bebe Miller's *Verge* at the Duke hadn't lauded her dancers' contributions to the piece, I'd have guessed their involvement. As in most of her works, they don't show steps; they form a society, bringing relevant personal baggage with them. Their behavior comes across as warm, instinctual, yet governed by codes both personal and public. They look like us, although they perform acts we could never do or would never dare do. "Relax," Ted Johnson tells Darrell Jones; Jones stands patiently while Johnson vigorously attempts to mold his mouth into a smile.

Miller has been working with text for some time now: private memories (sometimes in a voice-over) and sociopolitical inquiry. Movement serves as a tempestuous statement of subtext. In the Bessie-winning *Verge*, the four dancers are unobtrusively miked, and Talvin Wilks, rather than Miller, wrote the text. There's no linear narrative. The same few sentences, repeated in varying contexts, alter in meaning. Cross-purposes abound. Standing almost face-to-face, Johnson and Angie Hauser Robinson speak at each other: "Don't go." "Come closer." "I have to go." "Stay with me." Johnson attempts the same dialogue with Jones, and doesn't even notice how differently he

reacts. An exchange based on "How does it feel?"/"It feels good" acquires a range of meanings—some concerned, some sexual, some unfathomable.

These people's habitat is open to the world: Scott Pask's white wall angles like the corner of a room. A raised strip of grass runs across the back. One slipcovered chair sits to the side. Michael Mazzola's lighting is as clear and spare and imaginative as Hahn Rowe's music. The dancers sometimes move fluidly, sometimes explosively. They strut, they prance. They fumble their way into alliances. At one point, Melissa Wynn looks as rangy and alert as a wildcat. Suddenly someone will just stop or wander away. As in all Miller's pieces, people's actions are inexplicable, yet completely understandable. Their desires, their frustrations, their thoughtful moments, their flashes of daring, their moments of connection, and their loneliness are ours.

Like the city of Havana, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba mixes faded beauty with grit and Latin verve. At City Center—where the company's founder-director Alicia Alonso starred with Ballet Theatre in the '40s—we're not used to such softly curving arms and delicately yearning upper bodies, not even in the romantic-era icon *Giselle*. Some of the deportment seems to come from an earlier decade. Despite frankly dazzling pyrotechnics, a kind of gentleness pervades the program of highlights. Part of this results from the dancers' composure and deceptive ease. You watch Oscar Torrado begin the pas de deux from *Sleeping Beauty* and think, "He's never going to be able to jump." Then with little preparation he leaves the ground, revolves several times in the air, and lands clean as a whistle. The marvelous Lorna Feijóo never loses her charm as she churns out an even string of fouettés or as, regrettably, she turns a dive into her lover's arms into a contortionist's trick. In scenes from *Coppélia*, Viengsay Valdés assumes a balance on point; then, while her partner,

Victor Gilí, looks on admiringly, she hovers there, rock steady, for an eternity. Alihaydée Carreño does the same thing in *Don Quixote*.

The company specializes in turns, leaps, and balances. When a man rotates his partner, you're aware of his hands on her waist, so firmly and so many times does he spin her. All this might seem vulgar, were it not for the almost eerie ease. You sense it even in the flash of *Don Q*, when the endearingly cocky Joel Carreño unleashes a series of impeccable backward turns in *attitude*.

Alonso's restaging of the classics is idiosyncratic. *Giselle's* Wilis point the hapless Hilarion toward the lake with a chillingly effective military snap of the arm; on the other hand, their bent-over runs suggest stomach cramps more than malevolence. As a consequence of the company's shoestring budget, production values vary. Costumes range from bronze and gold grandeur to tackiness. A painted blue swag hangs over everything, including a nighttime forest. The lighting is unflattering, and the balance in the recorded music is so curious that well-known scores sound unfamiliar. But when someone delivers a perfect multiple pirouette like a surprise gift, you forget all that.