

The Spring Dance Storm Is Here!

Laura Dean
James Cunningham
Grand Union
Lar Lubovitch

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Laura Dean's work always impresses me. Her dances are charged with a sense of order. The dancers' communion with each other seems almost idyllic, perhaps because it occurs without overt communication. They dance easily in clear geometrical patterns, most often in unison, most often facing the audience—held together, I think, by a shared pulse and by a common internal picture of what the whole space looks like.

There are six dancers in "Song" and two musicians, Laura Dean and David White at twin pianos. Dean wrote the music—chains of small repetitive modules that periodically accumulate and deaccumulate elements. Sometimes the music sounds to me as if it were rolling in circles, growing and shrinking. The dancers, wearing scarlet Indian shirts and paler trousers, begin by singing a repeating sequence of six-part counterpoint—very sweet and clear. The rhythms, melodic fragments, and "hey, ha, ho" articulations make me think of Alpine festivals. For a long, long time, the dancers spin, traveling in a circle, moving their arms to new positions; sometimes their changes happen every few counts; sometimes they grow slowly. Around and around and around and around. As I watch them, I feel my stomach give an occasional heave. The dense two-piano sounds roll and tumble behind them. Suddenly a new pattern: every other dancer spins into the center, and those three do a brief side-to-side stamping pattern before whirling out so the other three can whirl in.

Later Dean spreads the dancers out for some crisp skipping, hopping, jumping, running stuff in place—percussive, but springy. She expands this—makes patterns that cut through the space, introduces polyphony, sets a temporary soloist against a temporary chorus, adds singing to the dancing, builds up speed. There's an extraordinary moment when at a

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Laura Dean's "Song"

climax of complexity and intensity, the dancers stop moving, in amazing synchrony slow down and soften their singing, and begin to stroll in pairs away from their tight clump. You feel that expansiveness, that relieving grace in the center of your own mind and body.

Afterward, I tried to figure out why, since this work clearly shows new and intriguing developments in Dean's work (the solo variants of the material, for instance, the singing), I didn't like it quite as well as "Drumming," the amazing work she presented last spring (also in the Brooklyn Academy's LePercq Space). One reason, I think, is that while Dean's music works well with "Song," "Drumming" was performed to music by Steve Reich, a giant among back-to-basics composers. There's no way to get around that. Also, much as I admired their endurance and skill, this group of dancers gave me the impression that not all of them, all the time, really had the pulse in their bodies, but were

keeping themselves afloat by sheer willpower.

Up to now, I've felt that whenever James Cunningham needed a new work, he'd unroll a swatch from this one long dance he's got, hack it off, hem the ends so they wouldn't run, and hang it before us. The most recent pieces have been gaudier than the first and the weaving more expert, but I loved the straggly early parts, so I liked seeing "The Return of Mr. Fox," a retrospective collage of Cunningham high points which the Acme Dance Company presented at a recent Town Hall Interlude. I wish Cunningham had included even more very early stuff.

The Town Hall program also featured the premiere of "Aesop's Fables" by Cunningham and Lauren Persichetti—the first work, I think, based on ideas not of Cunningham's devising and the first set to a complete musical score with integrity of its own (Vincent Persichetti's charming "Fables for Narrator and Orches-

tra"). The fun of this dance-gloss on Aesop lies not so much in watching classy dancing, as in being surprised by what sly double entendres are going to pounce on the text. Or by what outrageous—but perfectly legitimate—contemporary slant the tales acquire.

For instance, "Grapes" is Barbara Ellman posturing languidly on a ladder, while the bushy-tailed, football-jerseyed Fox (Ted Strigles) paws lustfully below—puzzled that his warmups and correct stances avail him nothing. Donkey (Candace Prior) is a pretty ballet student, and greedy Wolf (Lauren Persichetti), a lesbian schoolmistress, is sent flying by a well-aimed kick from hard, hoofy point shoes. Fox is a 19th-century highwayman and Cat his moll, while the pursuing hounds are gotten up like Holmes and Watson. The Camel (Cunningham), who tries to beat the Monkey at a dance competition is a hunch-shouldered, stilt-legged Puritan at a rowdy Restoration court. Cun-

ningham is also superb as Swan, a droopy medieval lady in a white hennin (the undoing of Persichetti's shabby, fluttering scullery maid of a Sparrow), and as a scatty Hare, thumping everything in his path, a thoroughly bad loser to slow Tortoise (Michael Deane).

I liked the deft human satire, the trace of class consciousness Persichetti and Cunningham impose on (or bring out of) the tales. The sophistication and the wonderful costumes contrast wryly with the slides of kids' drawings, stools and ladders, turns-taking narrators. The annual performance of a very worldly-wise kindergarten.

Steve Paxton couldn't make it this time; Trisha Brown's busy with her own stuff. Guest Grand Unioner Valda Setterfield is charming and helpful; but, watching her, I think it must be tough, if exhilarating, to be a newcomer in one of those combustible Grand Union evenings. Sometimes I wonder if I were out there whether I'd have any trouble discovering whether I wanted to, say, roll drowsily on the floor with Barbara Dille, or help David Gordon—suddenly an inscrutable dress designer who speaks in a singsong—stick paper leaves all over Nancy Lewis, or lope around with Douglas Dunn.

Of course I love it when the Grand Union really brings off something terrific—a tableau, a dialogue, a dance, a song; but what I appreciate most about the improvised evenings is being able to see the processes that either instigate change or block it. I'm not sure how to make this sound interesting to anyone else, but it means a great deal to me to watch performers making up their minds. Grand Union members occasionally embark on crazily risky projects, but I think they risk the most in being willing to show themselves at a loss. Between peaks. High and dry. On some level, they're like some family I know (perhaps that's why I miss Steve and Trisha) and yet don't know. Maybe like a family I can see and hear through the window of a nearby apartment. When I'm not engrossed in what they're doing, I

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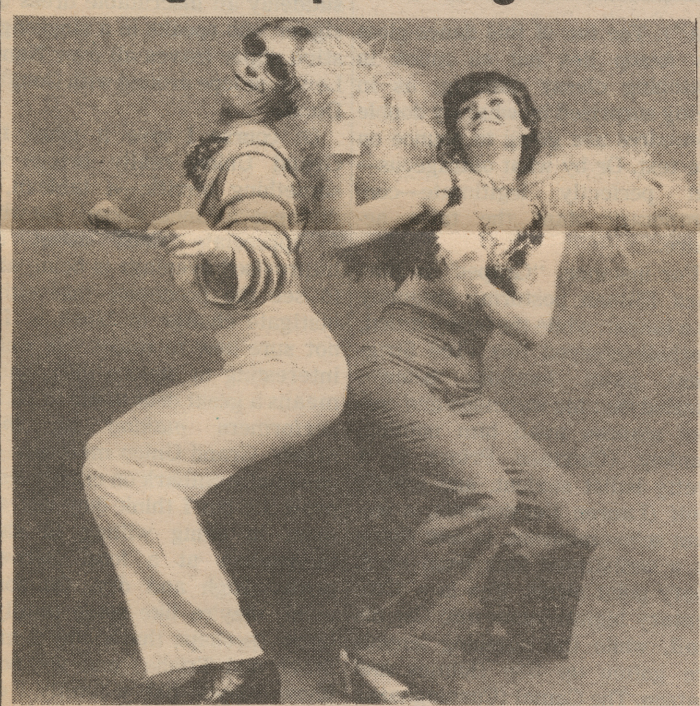
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Dance

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like trying to predict what they'll do next—who will join whom or pick up on what. The night I went to La Mama to see them they didn't dance much, but were very bright and funny with words and ideas. Gordon danced Setterfield younger and younger until she ended up thumb-sucking. Lewis, bent on interviewing Dunn who was dancing and curt), was herself being interviewed by Gordon who, he said, interviewed interviewers. I felt an edge of sharpness and uneasiness during the evening which I couldn't quite trace. That happens in families, too.

Lar Lubovitch's "Session" is a lovable work, the kind that almost anyone who has ever danced will respond to. It celebrates the sweaty camaraderie of rehearsals, showing the putting together of a dance as an invigorating, but jolly business. It's also tempting to use "Session" as a kind of yardstick to measure where Lubovitch has been, predict where he's going, keep tabs of his liabilities and assets. I have a hunch that Lubovitch, despite his balleticisms, is attracted to the idea of weighty, ecstatic dancing, like that of certain modern dancers of the past, like Jose Limon. Many of his dances have a churning, tumbling power. Yet they often stall, and I think it's because he makes such classroom rhythms. The gang in "Session," dancing to their own "yah, da-da, DEE, da-da" chanting, hammers this point home: that eventually the heavy downbeat, the metrical emphasis, can nail dancing down instead of giving it the oomph to take off.

However, this rehearsal-style dancing, with all its attendant kidding around actually turns out to be looser and juicier than some of Lubovitch's movement. I sense him trying to loosen up, but even in "Session" he occasionally over-patterns or overplays the supposed informality. When Rob Besserer makes Debra Zalkind soar into the air and it feels so good she's beaming, I like hearing the others' satisfied "aaaah!", but do I have to get it in unison and in a rhythm? Zalkind's gutty, almost lascivious delight in dancing and egging on the others is what this dance is all about; the unison sighs and slumps aren't.

The dancers got to loosen up a lot—and some of them were valiant but couldn't—in Sara Rudner's "One Good Turn." I'm puzzled by Rudner's group pieces, "Boa" and this one. They both have a rough tone, a kind of irritability that surprises me. Maybe it's that the dancers, aiming for Rudner's supple and ambiguous style, end up like larking tomboys. Maybe the irritability is my response to her structure: before I can grasp what's going on in that corner, she's dropped it. I remember with pleasure certain things she lingered over: Gerrie Houlihan draping her long body over a red chair, Zalkind repeatedly catching Mari Ono and sinking with her; Laura Gates in an odd panting phrase. I also remember with gratitude Susan Weber's gravely beautiful dancing.

Erratum (not mine): That was a nice photo of Joanne Bruggeman and Bob Bowyer in my column last week labeled as Lynn Seymour and Anthony Dowell. Shades and Elton John drag might make for a bizarre "A Month in the Country."