

Artists collaborate on an energetic essay

By Mike Steele
Staff Writer

"The Photographer/Far From the Truth," the music-theater-dance collage that rumbled into O'Shaughnessy Auditorium Friday night, turned out to be an astonishingly invigorating and provocative work. It arrived fresh from its spirited, controversial performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.

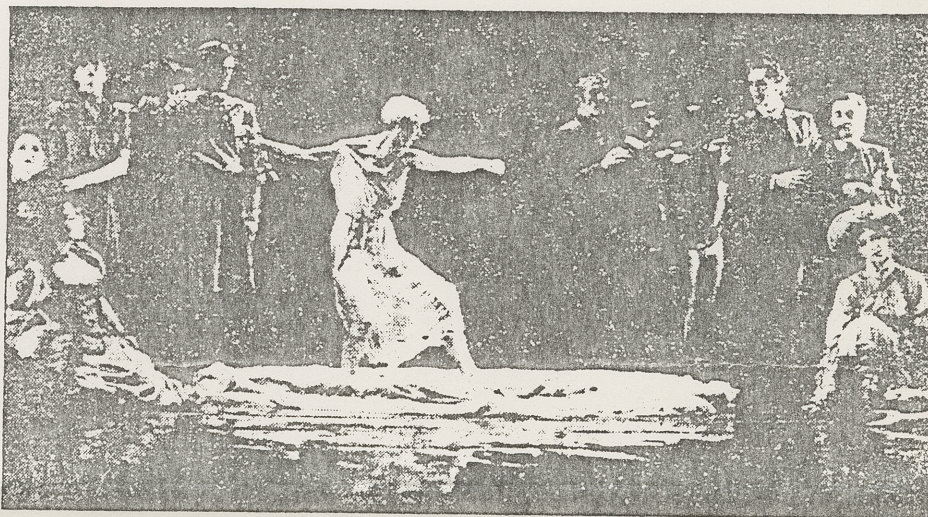
Ostensibly a look at the movement studies and theories of Victorian photographer Eadweard Muybridge, as well as at some lurid aspects of his life, the work is really an essay on the possibilities of art in a world filled with images that are far from the truth. It has a great, densely packed power far stronger than its individual parts.

The work is a collaboration featuring Philip Glass' music, JoAnne Akalaitis' direction, David Gordon's choreography, Santo Loquasto's settings and, certainly not least, Jennifer Tipton's astonishing lighting.

It all began a few years ago at the Holland Festival as a theatrical exploration of Muybridge's ideas. He's best known for his sequential series of still photos showing horses leaping, men wrestling, women running, all manifestations of the prevailing 19th century anti-romantic trend toward scientific objectivity in art as the best way of getting at the truth in nature. And what could be more honest than the photograph — cool, factual, detailed?

Yet in counterpoint to this was a steamy incident in Muybridge's life in which he murdered his wife's lover, was tried and acquitted. The obvious point is that, like Victorian society, the outwardly pious objectivity hid a steamy, overheated passion that ultimately could not be denied.

Muybridge was in the forefront of



Valda Setterfield (center) in the dance finale of "The Photographer."

A review

the new modernism, and "The Photographer" has an equal position at the head of what we're reluctantly calling postmodernism. Instead of coolly and intellectually looking in from above, "The Photographer" gluts itself with artifice, subjective imagery, emotional energy, wryly grandiose styles, operatic scale, flamboyant humor and surprising sensuality.

We're discovering now that photographs are never objective and never true. The photographer decides how to frame them, what is left in and what left out and they're all open to personal interpretation. Muybridge's studies of motion led to animation and finally to film. Today

we're bombarded by images in all media, all arguing their truthfulness.

"The Photographer" seems to be a reassertion that if any truth is discoverable it's through imagination and personal expression, through the embracing of contradictory images and fragmentary styles, through artifice itself, which allows us to create new ways of seeing things.

The work is given in three parts. The first is a drama written by Robert Coe and directed by Akalaitis. It's a collage of images dealing with the murder and trial counterpointed by arguments for and against the scientific, "natural" use of photography. It's done in a high Victorian, melodramatic style with great humor and commitment. The book is thin on its own terms, but the use of movement energized it and some of the farce was as telling as it was funny. While Muybridge's wife is being passionately undressed by her lover, for instance, the two converse through lines from a book on Victorian etiquette.

Loquasto's sets and costumes also bring verve. They're motivated by Max Ernst's surreal collage novels, and they're beautiful and unsettling with their Victorian touches running slightly askew, lit eerily and beautifully by Tipton, whose work is amazing.

The second section is a concert of Glass' music. It's a strangely evocative work based on the repetitive cycles of Eastern music played by Glass' own ensemble heightened by some brilliant singing from Dora Ohrenstein. It had to be, and was, absolutely true as it bounded through the long string of subtly shifting solfège syllables and quick internal shifts. But the music, too, was transformed as it became an underscore for a show of projections of Muybridge's work, not only the work as he intended, but his work rephotographed to fit the music, cropped, collaged, the images actually set in motion. Ironically, this is an updating of Muybridge's work, presented inauthentically and subjectively, and it worked totally with the music.

And finally there is a stunning dance finale by Gordon. At its center it features Valda Setterfield draped in

a Greek tunic standing in a shallow pond slowly moving with self-conscious artfulness through poses from Muybridge works or moves related to it. In the meantime dancers and cast members from the first section hurtle about the stage as if propelled, uncannily matching the building energy of Glass' music.

Soon there are waves of activity flying around the still center of Setterfield's dance, little narratives acted out, Victorian life flying by, some of it recapitulating actions we'd seen in the play section. Like Muybridge's photos, the dance is full of quick starts and stops and it captures better than any other section the essence of Muybridge's process. The stage is energized and the imagery overwhelms. Yet in its center there is the dominant image of Setterfield, a nymph in a fountain, a final paradox.

The final build of Glass' music, its propulsion and fire, may not be complicated on musical terms but it was overwhelming on theatrical ones, especially as it acted on and accepted the flow of movement and visual imagery around it. But it was true of the whole work. The use of movement in the dramatic section, of choreographed images in the musical section, of musical thrust and visual design in the dance section, everything truly interacted and the possibilities of the theater were opened wide.