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Serious Fun

Alastair Macaulay and David Vaughan sample a New York performance festival

"Unleash your id!" says the publicity. "Do Serious Fun." Serious Fun is the crazy-quilt name of a performance festival that Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center presents every summer, just as the New York streets start to feel like an oven. Performance art, mixed media postmodern dance, artrock film-music. ... it all qualifies.

I spent two evenings this summer at Serious Fun, one good, one mainly wonderful. On one Saturday night, Art Zoyd, a group of four French musicians, accompanied Mur-nau's classic 1921 *Dracula* movie *Nosferatu* with loud, punching, acid art-rock sound. A privilege to see this film on a huge screen; (the musicians' massive equipment piled in high tiers on either side); a surprise to find that it gained in excitement from Art Zoyd's score almost as much as, say, the 1926 *Ben Hur* does from Carl Davis's score played live by a big orchestra. The rock sound - which occasionally lapsed into deliberate silence - didn't have the range to catch the film's more tender or ironic passages, but it gave it terrific suspense. Varied instrumentation ensured that the sound was never monochrome, and amplification gave instruments new qualities. (At one point I noted down: "Terror saxophone.")

The evening before had been a double bill - Harry Kipper in *Big Bad God* and Blue Man

Group in *Tubes*. Kipper is a stand-up comic who retold Old Testament stories with a part-Cockney, part-North-country accent, blurry enunciation, infantile jokes and a few performance-art gimmicks.

Ten seconds after the interval, however, I'd forgotten all about it, because of Blue Man Group. These three men are the Martians of performance art, or perhaps the commedia dell'arte of outer space: weird, ter-

rifying, ingenious and quite marvellous. Their faces and visible skin are all painted deep azure, they wear black armour, and, though each shows some individual character, they show no emotion. *Tubes* included drumming, amplified eating, new-wave painting, audience participation, live video, several miles of paper and, oh yes, a lot of primary-coloured paint.

Tubes involved so much

deliberate ickiness early on - gobbling paint on a canvas; amplified eating of cereal; erupting zits stylised as volcanic lava - that any healthy-minded audience member soon stopped feeling prissy and started to revel in the show's brilliant intricacy. The best joke of the amplified eating cereal noise wasn't the loudness of the crunching, it was the rhythmic trio they turned that into. The punchline of the

gobbling-paint-on-a-canvas was the way in which one Blue Man, who held the canvas, let one colour of paint trail down in one direction and then (after the next gobbling) let another colour trail down in another direction; making, in short, much the same Davenport type of painting William Packer was describing on this page last week.

And not even Dame Edna so terrorised an audience as these

three. Of those dragged up to participate, the one I remember best was the man who was taken into the wings and shown on live video (projected to us on a huge screen) being helped into a straitjacket, hung upside down, tarred with paint and then swung on to a bare canvas: to make another new-wave painting.

In the climax of the performance, a drumming and lighting spectacle show developed onstage, when the Blue Men walked over the audience seated in the stalls and started to unroll huge rolls of white paper that were hung along the Alice Tully Hall balcony. Paper flowed forth in torrents, down over the audience; everyone seated there found themselves obliged to raise their hands to pass paper, paper, paper overhead (to keep from drowning in the stuff), passing it forwards to the rows in front; and the light came by way of very powerful stroboscope, so that one saw this tidal wave of paper not only from beneath but also in a broken sequence of successive "frames."

Then, as the paper and the light cleared, everyone saw the Blue Men, back onstage, drumming busily away, in a fanfare of light, while multi-coloured fluids spun out from their chests like Catherine wheels. By this point, the audience was delicious with surprise and delight. Me too. Maybe our ids had been unleashed.

Megadance

Megadance is a grab-bag of work by a number of experimental choreographers, four of them this year, each of whom presented a new piece, writes David Vaughan.

The first and best was *Impact*, by Elizabeth Streb, whose work expands the definition of dance to include acrobatics, tumbling, and aerialism. Streb and her intrepid team of dancer-athletes hurl themselves through space, against walls, against each other. This time the wall was of plexiglass, enabling the audience to see the action on both sides of it. If choreography can be defined as the arrangement of bodies in space and time, then this is undoubtedly choreography.

For the audience there is the vicarious thrill of watching people testing their strength

and endurance to the utmost; even as we wince and gasp, we laugh.

The evening went downhill from there. Ann Carlson, Doug Elkins, and Charles Moulton each presented work that called into question the assumptions of American culture, in ways that ranged from the incoherent to the downright incompetent. The audience apparently found such things as disco moves to baroque music - or alternatively, ballet steps to rock and roll - fresh and funny.

On other evenings, the festival presented old and new work by Lucinda Childs and David Gordon. These are hardly "emerging" choreographers - both were original members of the Judson Dance Theater in the early 60s. Dance, with choreography by

Childs, music by Philip Glass, and a film decor by Sol LeWitt, is a celebrated collaboration dating from 1979.

The film - of the original cast - is projected on a screen at the front of the stage; behind it, we see the dancers performing the same sequences. Watching the skipping, turning, hopping phrases is rather like reading a Gertrude Stein text in which every so often there is some slight modification of the endlessly repeated sentences. Only Childs herself and Daniel McCusker remain from the 1979 cast; her torso now looks more rigid than it does in the film, but she is still a commanding presence.

David Gordon has for many years worked with text as well as movement. His latest work, *The Mysteries and What's So*

Funny?, performed by members of his Pick Up Performance Company and several actors, is to all intents and purposes a play, whose warp is the life, work, and thought of Marcel Duchamp and whose woof is the history of a family.

This may sound confusing but it is crystal-clear in performance thanks to Gordon's masterly manipulation of the various levels of action and meaning and to Valda Setterfield's incandescent performance as Duchamp. The music was again by Philip Glass, and the witty decor, full of allusions to Duchamp, by Red Grooms. The Gordons are a talented family. Setterfield is David Gordon's wife, and their son Ayn Gordon is the author and director of another brilliant piece seen this year, *Get In The Car*.