

DANCE

Pillaging Myth and Memory

RUSH FORWARD. LOOK BACK.

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

PEARL RIVER

Context Studios

DAVID GORDON AND THE PICK UP PERFORMANCE COMPANY

Danspace St. Mark's

Envision a Kung Fu movie performed by computerized action figures with serious glitches and you *might* grasp something of the wacky, speeded-up carnage that propels Stacy Dawson and David Neumann's *Pearl River*. Now add Chinese opera and postmodern irony to the mix. *Pearl River* might be thought of as a satire on the clichés of millennial orientalism, but anyone lucky enough to catch the show was probably laughing too hard to do much thinking. Excerpts from the soundtrack from Jackie Chan's *Spiritual Kung Fu* blare tough-guy dialogue and deceptively sentimental blossom-viewing talk punctuated by the sound of body-blows, grunts, and breaking glass. A bald, skimpy-bearded sage (Ken Nintzel) toddles about, hanging Japanese lanterns on the turquoise walls. He's periodically tormented by two ghosts he can't see: Tymberly Canale and Brooke Davila looking like dreadful dolls, in white dresses with flame-red wigs. A FedEx box arrives for him; it contains a leopard print sweatsuit and does wonders for his posture. A rambunctious life-sized black velvet horse (its front part anyway) plays a role, as does "downtown legend" Flloyd, who appears robed and bewigged, looking like the predatory Katisha in *The Mikado*; especially arresting is the moment when, dramatically lip-synching "The Sounds of Silence," she pulls the chopsticks from her "do" and aims them at her eyes.

In the most hilarious scenes, Neumann and Dawson play a boss fighter and a less experienced one, and a naive boy and a sweet young girl with a fist of iron. Their wincing and aghast reactions, their parries and falls, are all skewed, absurd, and performed at virtuosic speed. They capture the gist of the recorded dialogue in bizarre ways. Instead of lip-synching, they may keep their mouths still and gesture; Dawson sometimes just sticks her tongue out and wiggles it. You realize how elegantly choreographed their dances and dance-fights are when the moves get repeated in several scenes. Don't ask me to sum up the plot, but I think Flloyd zaps everyone and strong-arms Nintzel into the sunset. I mean the strobe light.

» Lola Pashalinski is David Gordon. David Gordon is David Gordon on occasion. Wendell Beavers is David's mother and postmodern guru Bob Dunn. Cynthia Oliver is critic Arlene Croce. Paul Langland is choreographer James Waring. They're others too. Hope Clark, Scott Cunningham, Karen Graham, Eli McAfee, and Brendan McCall are mostly themselves as David Gordon performers. Lucy Sexton is Merce Cunningham for a second, then any number of people who have given to Gordon and gone away. Ed Fitzgerald is the stage manager who also is other people and who tosses a paper cup of snow in the air whenever Minneapolis is mentioned. Valda Setterfield is always Valda Setterfield, Gordon's wife and muse, but, as she says, he wrote the words she's saying.

Gordon, who began to show work back in the '60s as a member of Judson Dance Theater, used to claim that he wasn't a choreographer; he "con-

structed" work. Recently he's been directing plays and writing them (sometimes with his son Ain). If he isn't a choreographer, who is? His short, blunt sentences ride on rhythm. People slip words through a wheeling doorframe and around a tilting plywood sheet. Movement you'd *call* dance lives in flux. In *Debris Flow*, to a harrowing taped narrative of a family's ordeal in a massive L.A. mudslide, four performers grasp one another and slip away and find new holds as if constancy within change were the only true thing in life.

The profoundly clever *Autobiography of a Liar*, a late-breaking highlight of Danspace's Silver Series, recycles elements from early works; adds a beautiful new contrapuntal dance, *Twenty One Minutes Some Odd*; acknowledges his mentors and former colleagues; and keeps everything flowing and gathering force like lava through a twisty gorge.

Gordon has always been a master of layering. Silver-haired Setterfield plays herself with hostessly charm, warmth, and rueful wit. Imitating poses in Eadweard Muybridge's photo sequences, she recalls the choreographer-dancer kibitzing that attended the dance's composition in 1972. These arguments, taped then, also accompany her performance. After we learn that Arlene Croce introduced Gordon to Balanchine, Gordon ushers Setterfield, Graham, and Oliver through the doorframe like Apollo guiding his muses, and he and Setterfield, his Terpsichore, move poignantly to Stravinsky's music.

According to the choreographer, this journey through a career contains "half remembered half truths about dances made another time in another life accommodating the talents of performers I was in love with and remade for the talents of performers I hope to be in love with now." Who could ask for more? ▣

Salaam Orchestrates Kwanzaa

AURAL HISTORY

"A journey through the rhythms of the African diaspora" is how Abdel Salaam describes *Rhythm Legacy*, which plays Tuesday at Aaron Davis Hall during Forces of Nature Dance Theatre's 19th Annual Kwanzaa Regeneration Night. Though Salaam sounds like an encyclopedia of African cultural history, his dances are anything but academic. His movement base spans centuries and continents: ritual, social, and theater dance; tap, swing, and hip-hop. Sinuous spines undulate; bodies fold forward from the hips, arms whirling; hands cup the air, shoulders ripple, heads bob gently. A dancer sprays liquid (traditionally rum but at a recent performance emanating from an iced-tea bottle) from her mouth in a vodun trance. Simple patterns repeat, transform, and crescendo. Salaam, 49, adds modern-dance savvy, theatrical structure, and infectious live music.

"*Rhythm Legacy* is centered around ancestral stuff," he says. A Haitian segment gives way to "juba plantation dances with their origin in Zaire, Senegal, or Guinea. Irish jigs cross-pollinated with juba" begat tap dancing. Included are a "ring shout," where ancestral blessings are sought, to a pantomime of scavengers preying on the dead. These "buzzard lopes," he explains, are about finding strength to move through weakness. He invokes the concept of the "living book." Like oral history, dance and song carried information down through generations. "In the slave belt, people couldn't read. The Afro-centered stuff of culture is dance and music and narrative. They 'read' it by seeing it, singing it, experiencing it live." —Suki John