

DANCE

It's Not a Door When It's Ajar

By Deborah Jowitt

THE PHOTOGRAPHER/Far from the Truth. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music (October 4-16). An opera with music by Philip Glass, book by Robert Coe, movement constructed by David Gordon, and directed by JoAnne Akalaitis.

MARTA RENZI AND DANCERS. At DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater (September 29-October 16). *Indian Miniatures*, *Cadenza Cartoons*, and *What Practice Makes*.

No, it's not the *gesamtkunstwerk* we might have expected—Philip Glass's opera, *The Photographer/Far from the Truth*. Instead, the ideas, events, illusions pertinent to the life and work of revolutionary 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge have been fragmented and reassembled to form a highly contemporary analogue to the sort of Victorian theater evening that director Joanne Akalaitis describes in the program: first a melodrama, then a lecture, then a dance.

There's scarcely any of Glass's music in the first part, but there are reams of words, most of them culled by librettist Robert Coe from diverse 19th century texts. Sometimes text and action journey in sync; sometimes they seem to pull apart, so that what you're seeing meshes oddly with what you're hearing. While Muybridge's wife, Flora, is being eagerly undressed by her lover, Harry, the two of them converse in instructions from a book of etiquette.

The plot of the drama, which concerns Muybridge's shooting of his wife's lover (who has fathered the child Muybridge thought his own), his trial for murder, and his acquittal, is intercut with and superimposed on arguments concerning his pursuit of the "natural" in photography. The stage—with its little roll-on parlor, and other set pieces, its bewitching backdrops (by Santo Loquasto) that show grids and thermometer scales or bromoil transfers of interiors or landscapes—is peopled by the characters in the story and by figures from photographs, not only Muybridge's but the fanciful ones then in vogue (Wanda Bimson is a screeching mermaid, Blondell Cummings an angel). We see these as discrete images, vivid, but as unknowable as those in a picture. And all the while, cameras are placed, people are posed, flash guns and revolvers echo each other.

The "lecture" that follows the melodrama is an amazing display of Muybridge's action photographs projected as slides to (finally!) uninterrupted music. As the play is ending, we see, gorgeously illumined behind a scrim (exceptionally beautiful lighting by Jennifer Tipton), hanging panels of colored silk; one by one they fall and ripple to the floor, like veils being stripped away. The stop/flow rhythm suggests the individual photographs that Muybridge put into sequences to show human action. And here come the famous photo strips. A man walking. A man jumping. A baby walking. A woman bathing. A woman walking. A wrestler. Two wrestlers. The pictures—now large, now small, now on the downstage scrim, now on an upstage one, now projected in a block, now rapidly one by one to suggest the movies they presaged—move, *dance*. Wendall K. Harrington designed the projections, Akalaitis, I believe, had something to do with the sequence. The driving pulse of Glass's music, with



Valda Setterfield in Philip Glass's *The Photographer*: "What do you really see?"

its internal shifts of action, its jubilant unearthly harmonies, help us see the pictures swing and soar. What we hear lends momentum to what we see and at the same time fixes the photos as split seconds arrested from the flow of time.

Other *Voice* critics are writing about the direction and text, and about the music. I've said this much only to place David Gordon's quite brilliant dance construction in relation to the whole. The dance begins quietly, with Valda Setterfield going through a calm litany of poses culled from Muybridge photos. She's naked under her white Grecian tunic, and the crumpled ring of pink plastic she's standing within turns out to contain water she can spray up like Muybridge's bather. She does this until the end, a cool reference point. Gordon, in his work, has always posed Muybridgian questions: "What do you see? No, what do you *really* see?" Susan Eschelbach and Margaret Hoeffel, dressed as a schoolgirl and a circus woman, dance in—jumping, holding hands to pull each other into the air. Somewhat later, Nina Martin melds herself into a repeat of the brief Eschelbach-Hoeffel duet, and so firmly is it a trio that we wonder why the duet didn't look incomplete. It's the same with Keith Marshall's trim bravura solo (in messenger boy uniform); its impetus seems to alter when we see it later in counterpoint to a more smoothly athletic dance done by Paul Thompson (dressed as a Moroccan).

Gordon also brings onto the stage almost all the characters who appeared in the play. At first a few of them pass through, walking, then more and more of them. Gordon studs the work with "shots" from action we saw earlier, but dislocates them. Now it's not the little boy (Bart Acocella) who swoons affectedly in the arms of the bosomy mesmerist (Lola Pashalinski), it's someone else. Way upstage, Susan Eschelbach embraces Flora Muybridge's lover.

What doesn't refer to the story refers to the photographs we've seen and clarifies images that once baffled us. The musclemen (Arthur Williams) who hefted the screaming mermaid in the first act now becomes the wrestler Muybridge photographed, although others show us those movements too. A jerky fit of hysteria that overcame Blondell Cummings at the end of the opera prologue now reads as an action segmented by Muybridge's successive stills.

Before long, all the performers are embroiled in Gordon's dance—running,

freezing, gesturing. Not only are the movements derived from Muybridge photos, the form of the dance makes references to his process and the illusion it produced. The people are almost always in profile, as are Muybridge's subjects, and layered on the stage as the slides were layered on the scrims. The crosscurrents of flow and halt that Gordon builds up make the entire stage a paradox: we begin to see the motion in what is still, the stillness in what is moving. No wonder early photography was associated, by some people, with the occult. In wrenching a single moment from life and thus enlarging its importance, it purported a truth which it also subverted. Perhaps that's why, during the barely moving tableau-prologue of people around a card table, we heard a taped anthology of riddles: When does a woman's face become something else? When it's a little pail (pale). What's always behind time? The back of a clock. Who shoots you and blows you up, so you can go home and hang yourself? The photographer.

One thing you can say about Marta Renzi is that she doesn't intend to get stuck in a groove. Sometimes, I think, she barges into a new choreographic byway, figuring she'll learn the traffic code later. In her current DTW concerts, Renzi dives into aspects of dance that are new to her. Usually her style is rough-edged, casual to the point of fumblingness, endearing in its forthright manners, rarely emphasizing shape. In *Indian Miniatures*, she and Peter Stathas melt slowly into positions your eye can grab onto—positions that have the clarity of angle and curve seen in Indian erotic statuary—which they very much resemble. While Renzi sinks back against Stathas in the attitude of a frescoed Apsara, Stathas holds her breasts. The poem Daniel Wolff recites on tape creates subtly, out of color and sun and the heat of bodies, sensuous images that link an urban apartment with a timeless, exotic sexual landscape. Renzi and Stathas imprint the ancient copulation poses coolly on their own easy, contemporary bodies, avoiding all suggestion of male domination. The brief duet is like a sketch, a tryout, not fully formed but arresting as it is.

Cadenza Cartoons is a more ambitious dive for Renzi, and it makes more of a splatter. I think she wanted to make a comedy without the customary timing used to underscore funny points, a piece

that would let its jokes barely surface as flotsam in a sea of dancing. She dresses Melissa Matson as a sleek drum majorette (Matson is *fine*), Peter Stathas as a prince type, Teresa Duggan as a society princess maybe, herself as a furry beast, all pretending to be in a ballet. Prince picking up doggy themes. Beast as majorette. Everyone messing up. To Mozart horn concerti. It's not a piece you can actively dislike, but it struck me as almost too incoherent for its own good.

I saw the first part of Renzi's *What Practice Makes* at Jacob's Pillow this past summer and loved the idea of it: dancers building a dance, not by talking and stopping, but by joining and leaving, practicing, watching a gradually evolving vocabulary of steps. Renzi-as-choreographer begins alone, but you feel her creative process to be part of the dancing rather than what's producing it. Everything is part of the dancing. Even the dancers' rehearsal behavior to each other, their discarding of sweaters, putting on of shoes, seem subtly keyed into the form and the Beethoven music, echoed here and there by more formal motifs.

And now, the first part, "Rehearsal," leads into the second, "Performance." Musicians arrive, Luke's II Ensemble, and take their places. The dancers have stripped down to black outfits with sparkly bits here and there. But Renzi fools us. This isn't the dance they were practicing, and this music is Beethoven's Grosse Fugue, not the third movement of piano sonata 132. Well!

Still, the dancing in this new part is the kind of smart, appealing stuff audiences are used to getting from Renzi. It's difficult to do, but offhand in manner; polished, but rough around the edges; quick of foot and relaxed everywhere else; carefully shaped as to structure, then deliberately blurred.

It continues to bother me that Renzi seems to be saying "no big deal" so loudly. Her dancers don't always distinguish between being relaxed and being floppy. I was interested when they all brought in little wooden crates and began doing intrepid and beguiling stunts around and on them; they occasionally fell off or knocked the boxes over because they were being so imprecise with their energy. (Maybe she wanted them to do this.) Like Renzi, I love to see dancers acknowledging their human fallibility, but, in the context of the very "dancy" stuff Renzi makes, fallibility has the most impact when it's a quiet companion to demonstrated expertness. ■