dance

FROM LOVELY CONFUSION TO NAKED BREAKFAST

Seventeen artists were represented in concerts No. 6, 7, and 8 late last month at Judson Memorial Church. The basic virtue of these concerts continues to be the open door policy. No holds barred.

From the beginning this has meant the entry of "situations" into a scene which contained a legitimate "dance" foundation. Legitimacy is an odd notion. I'm using the term to describe, so far as it's possible, that motion by people which might be any non-functional exaggeration of natural action and which is traditionally conceived to be the result of some "training" in a professional dance studio where the exaggeration and/or distortion of natural action is roped off into structural, rhythmic (metric) divisions.

The Judson dancers have thrown the idea of legitimacy into lovely confusion. For one thing, the dancing itself is often so physical in such a natural way that it bears little resemblance to any conventional "attitudes" of dance. Secondly, the choreographer may be a painter, a sculptor, or a composer as well as a dancer, and that means the emphasis often settles on a theatre "situation" ("happening,") "event", rather than on legitimate dancing as defined above. Thirdly, there is an attitude of pure non-dance which is neither physical nor theatrical but a state of being. The notion of legitimacy becomes absurd. Dancing is what you think it is. Possibly the whole world of movement is dancing. So the question is: What is dancing, and if you know what dancing is, what is non-dancing?

One of the most astonishing dances in the recent series was a ten minute work, "Arizona," by sculptor Robert Morris. One city critic said Morris had the "conceit" to stand and do nothing while his voice on tape read a description of bringing cows through an alley and separating them into two areas. The description was factually detailed and full of the "movement" of cows and cowhands. There was that irony of the description juxtaposed to Morris' own presence as he stood in the center of the performing area (in shades and light blue shirt, pants) and turned his torso above the hips with imperceptible slowness from front to left. Morris announced the four parts of the dance by walking around close to the audience and extending a finger or fingers to indicate the part. The announcement itself was a dance action. Part two was a javelin throw. Morris stood with his back to the audience, javelin horizontally extended in both hands. Quiet. Shift into readiness position. More quiet. Then the throw—clean, exact, economical. Part three was a beautiful swing overhead of two blue lights on a rope, in the darkness, arcs expand in diameter as the rope increased its distance from hand. Part four involved a T-shape form made of two blue sticks. Morris moved the top stick slightly four times, alternating each move by walking to each corner of the space and remaining there for some seconds. In all the parts he created a spare, skeletal line of action in a big, empty space with a simple, direct, precise presence that could have been "not there" as well as "there."

'Chromolodeon'

To indicate the extreme range of interest on these programs I might next mention Carolee Schneeman's "Chromolodeon," which is essentially a messy, brainless "happening" with lots of clothes, paper, rags, burlap, and paint. The five performers get dressed up, move things from one place to another, get under piles of stuff, manipulate each other into odd positions. The gassy werewolf duet, the monkey-man on a mound with a megaphone, the jungle of paper, color, sounds (which could be more complete in a small environment) all made the kind of scene where nothing is coherent or formulated, where the activity is without premeditation or afterthought, like some form of life prior to the development of the forebrain—plankton or paleolithic.

Joseph Schlicter's "Faces of the Coin (Improvisations)" is also formless, but in another sense. Here the chaos was a result of eight performers making spontaneous interpretations from instructions they found on cards when they first arrived at a chair. The isolation, interference, or collaboration that ensued had no precedent in a rehearsal, so the performers were as surprised as the audience and the action was like bouncing molecules.

'Random Breakfast'

David Gordon's "Random Breakfast" contained another kind of improvisation. After Valda Setterfield does her strip (the whole bit) Mr. Gordon makes a dance on the spot by explaining to the audience what he might do if he were to make an interesting dance. Each explanation is accompanied by the appropriate illustration: an "exciting" entrance, a thematic movement, a symbolic movement, a religious movement, etc. Very funny parody of some old fashioned ideas and a final statement on any kind of dance making. "Breakfast" also includes Miss Setterfield's final statement on "happenings"—a leg spray, a foot wash, a couple of oaths, and a pie in the face. Mr. Gordon then polished things off with a stroll in top hat and tails, face all glowing with sweet sentimentality, accompanied by "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Gordon and Setterfield are classic wits on the scene. Long live classic wits.

(To be continued).

—Jill Johnston

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