

to *Baby*, cheeriness commercial nonconformity at irritating. A mama like *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, Peter revived at to be anything. An is wife kid ing room, ncouraging it hobbies. shock that g well, for 2-year-old rters dead f of serious thinks of om ascribes own sexual an Ibsenian

the stage is somehow the comforting atmosphere of middle-class civility, the triumph of humor over a grim situation, the hope of family tenderness, the cheery upbeat theater spirit that Denby complains about, the comfy sofa, the squeaky-clean living room. He's right. He didn't mention *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* in his *Atlantic* manifesto, and he's right about it anyway. The tone, the feeling is all too A-O.K.

It's just that *Egg*, and theater in general, has one other dimension that Denby doesn't discuss. Mum and Dad cope by joking and performing shticks, which is how they re-enact for the audience the episodes with minister and doctor. Sometimes they step out of the story and address the audience directly. And while much of this is clumsy as play-writing, and while the humor is less than hilarious, two important purposes are served. The comedy and shtick clear quite a little field for performance. Jim Dale puts his agile face and body and careful timing to good comedic use as Dad. Stockard Channing manages to communicate Mom's depth and reserve merely by how she crosses her legs. And these performances do something that can never be done in the movies: they involve the audience. Two women behind me spent the play whispering back and forth, "He's so wonderful," "She's so wonderful." Oh, abominable ladies—they should have been turned out by the usher; but in a sense they responded reasonably. People should go to the theater in the same spirit they go to sports events, Brecht said; and the abominable ladies were perfect Brechtians. They weren't sitting alone in the dark, wrapped in the play as in a dream, which is the experience of seeing a movie. They were at the theater. Their hearts were beating as one with the rest of the audience and with the actors. Their experience was collective.

Collective experience: that is what the serious movie-lovers don't understand. Denby, in looking for plays he could admire, finally recognized that theater has a literary quality that film cannot have. He celebrated two plays (*Glen-garry Glen Ross* and *Hurlyburly*) for their distinctly literary virtues. But in all his prowls through the theater district, he never seemed to stumble across the virtues that are uniquely theatrical, the excitement of a theater full of people all feeling the same thing, the peculiar energy that emerges when an actor

engages an audience and an audience gets caught up in an actor. I won't say that *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* creates that theatrical energy in any powerful or memorable way; but even a pretentious bourgeois work like this can generate the occasional electric thrill when performed by a cast in which "he's so wonderful," "she's so wonderful." That's what dramaphiles understand. Otherwise they'd save their money and go to the movies. □

DANCE.

MINDY ALOFF

**Field, Chair and Mountain
Einstein on the Beach**

Field, *Chair and Mountain*, recently given its premiere in Washington by American Ballet Theatre, seems as easy and mild as light verse. It also puts A.B.T.'s audience in an unusually good humor and, like every modern work that Baryshnikov has brought to the company, it flatters the dancers enormously. The casting is for four couples and a corps of six women, six men and six folding chairs; a ballerina folding chair also appears as a member of a pas de trois. The author is New York City "constructionist" and wordsmith David Gordon, who, despite the fact that he's making some of the brainiest movement art around, dislikes being called a choreographer. *Field*, his first full-fledged classical ballet, is strictly a construction—no word games, except the title, which plays off the composer's name. Perhaps because its material is limited and its music indolent, it has a muted tone. But the slanting falls, chaîné turns, 100 degree développés, bourrées and walking steps are deployed, shattered and refashioned with rich wit. Like a fur lining in a raincoat, craft provides an inner luxury.

The beginning is so subdued that I mistook the restraint for lack of focus. To the gentle opening of the Seventh Piano Concerto (1832) by Irish-born virtuosos pianist John Field, principal ballerina Martine van Hamel—statuesque and sheathed in blue—drifts across the stage several times. Once she simply performs a chain of walking turns; another time she reverses herself, yawningly extends a leg and bourrées off. Always proceeding from left to right, her en-

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frances make up a kind of continuous handwriting, the text of a solo—her story. Gradually, this story is traced over by three secondary couples, the men and women continually renegotiating the roles of support and display. By the end of the ballet's half hour, van Hamel and her partner, Clark Tippet, have been related to the other couples in a host of ways, the partnering has been pared from macroscopic lifts to microchip squeezes of the hand, and the primacy of the ballerina in classical dancing has been reaffirmed. Gordon has explored just a few key aspects of ballet, but intimately and with authority.

The intimacy is a function of skill; the authority is earned. Formed in the polemical 1960s, Gordon seems to be, by nature, an ironist, with an appreciation of paradox, a fascination with the psychology of partnering, an ambivalence about glamour and fame. On occasion, he has revealed a critical temperament and, in postmodern (or Balanchinian) fashion, an interest in layered allusions. He also husbands themes and effects. One can catch in *Field* the exalting imagery for women that Gordon has used in his duets for himself and his wife, Valda Setterfield, as well as the puns on pedestrian movement that riddle his pieces for his own Pick Up Comp. and a recent étude in partnered walking for Stuart Pimsler and Suzanne Costello. (The immediate antecedent to Gordon's A.B.T. piece was his *Field Dances* for the Extemporaneous Dance Theatre, a new British dance group.) Linking his efforts for lofts and opera houses is a remarkable dance momentum. Whether they're assuming an arabesque or moving furniture around, his performers are buoyed by a larger current or controlling pulse. They're always dancing, and the rhythmic continuity with which Gordon links pedestrian and theatrical gesture makes his elisions coherent.

In *Field*, Gordon has mastered van Hamel's heroic scale. Van Hamel is a magisterial dancer, particularly of Petipa, because she gives movement its full meaning in terms of line, mass and contour. She's a comparatively big ballerina, and, in the right roles, her work is peerlessly expansive. Harmony and proportion are the bread and water of her technique, and she deviates so little from the musical stress that she can, in the wrong roles, seem stolid. In *Field*, she begins to grow into Mount Ballerina with that early extension; by the end,

with the help of a consort, she's enthroned amid a court. (This is essentially the plot of the Petipa ballets in which she excels—*The Sleeping Beauty*, *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*.) My favorite moment for her occurs in a lift with Tippet. In one clapperlike motion, he sweeps her off the ground before him, and one of her legs sweeps up before her; then, continuing the momentum, it swings to the back in a sort of battement en cloche, radically changing her silhouette, turning it inside out like an enormous umbrella that succumbs to a gust of wind.

Van Hamel's most regal effects are achieved in her waltz with Tippet and a folding chair. The timing is so tricky and the conceits about absence and presence so fleet that they make one's head spin, much as watching a game of three-card monte, or the adagio for three at the heart of Balanchine's *Symphonie Concertante*.

The set and costumes for *Field* are by Santo Loquasto. The predominant colors are powder blue and shades of peach, lit by Jennifer Tipton as a new morning or mature twilight, as the situation demands. The set is in two parts: a screen of mountains that ponderously unfolds sideways and a painted backdrop that unwinds vertically, transforming itself from a field of periwinkle blue to a snow-capped peak where folding chairs gambol amid the glaciers. Perhaps the loveliest moment in the ballet is partially an effect of the decor. It comes when a nocturne is introduced in the concerto's first movement. (Field invented the form and enjoyed slipping it into his music.) Mysteriously yet efficiently, the screen inches into view from the left. Then, as if bonded in a living frieze, several couples in pinks and oranges sail painstakingly forth from the same direction, the women held in various positions at various heights, the men advancing them at various rates, each couple as large and innocent as a dinosaur. It's a panorama of simple yet intense emotion. From my chair, the dancers appeared to be fielding the grandeur of many mountains.

Lucinda Childs's new choreography for the revival of *Einstein on the Beach*—in 1984, the avant-garde's answer to *The Nutcracker*—was substantial and, in context, positively hyperkinetic. I didn't see the original production at the Metropolitan Opera House

in 1976, with dances by Andrew De Groat; this version, which played to sold-out houses at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December, was carefully performed and produced.

After four and a half hours in my seat, I was ready to go home, and was led there quietly. It's a mark of the work's weird transforming power that it brought an unsympathetic observer like me to an appreciation of Childs's choreography for groups, which, in the context of a two-hour performance, I've never been able to cotton to. In *Einstein*, she's responsible for two such dances, each called "Field (Space Machine)." The first one seemed an old friend: line after line of dancers entered the stage and, to a mesmerizing evenness, danced off. On. Off. On. Off. The second dance seemed new. Not only did the patterns vary from line to arc, but the smaller phrases also had dynamic play.

In her solo for the first scene of *Einstein*, which was part of the original production, Childs delivered a virtuoso performance, tracing her steps along the narrow terrain of an undeviating diagonal path. Each time she turned to renew the diagonal she was a different presence, projecting a different dance quality—light, sharp, cool, pressing. She also used her face more than I remember her doing in similar solos. Ordinarily, on stage, her features strike me as beautiful but cold. In *Einstein*, she was Duse. ☐

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