

DANCE TOBI TOBIAS

# Postmodern Medley

*A witty disorder of dancers and musicians clicks; tangling with the tango—and losing.*



**P**OSTMODERN DANCE EMERGED IN THE SIXTIES with the rakish, iconoclastic stuff spawned by a gang of bright aesthetic freethinkers at Judson Church down in the Village. Since then, experimental choreographers have been saying no to classical modern dance as well as to classical ballet, bent on “making it new.” April seemed to be postmodern month this season—several of the traditional moderns had had their flings, and the Lincoln Center troupes were still breaking in their pointe shoes—so, almost arbitrarily, I chose half a dozen downtown events and went out to look. The adventure yielded no wonders (though similar forays have), a fair amount of pleasure, and an equal portion of dismay.

Best first. **Yoshiko Chuma** is a zany maverick with a determined streak. She’ll grab an idea and shake it until it has surrendered its very last permutation. When the idea is dumb or dull to begin with, the tedium of the process is exasperating. This time, things clicked. Invading the sedate elegance of Japan Society, Chuma’s School of Hard Knocks joined forces with Crash Orchestra to create an atmosphere of colorful, offbeat havoc, in which dancers and musicians wittily mind each other’s business.

This kaleidoscopic circus of a piece turns its instrumentalists into actor-dancers and has its dancers-by-profession retrieve rudimentary musical skills acquired in the living rooms of their childhood or in their high-school bands before they made the fateful decision that the body was instrument enough. A cello, a grand piano, and a flock of metronomes do extra duty as props and even near-sentient characters. Chuma’s orchestration of the proceedings makes the wildly differing levels of skill seem charming, like the inspired makeshift of child’s play. If the piece outlasts its interest by about fifteen minutes, it more than justifies its existence with the qualities that make

god-awful New York attractive: borderline chaos, ebullient eccentricity, and the spontaneity that lies at the center of street theater, vaudeville, and great clowning.

**Doug Elkins**, who appeared at Dance Theater Workshop with a bunch of terrific dancers and a program ominously called “The Impotence of Being Earnest,” is one of those good-time guys—all slick, jazzy surface, no inside—whose numbers are growing as popularity becomes more and more crucial to survival in the dance world. Postmodernism has always had its antic aspect, but only in its second generation have its trappings been co-opted for easy entertainment. Blithely borrowing from ballet and disco dance, Elkins’s choreography is punchy and vivid, possessed of a with-it air, and far too conscious of creating an effect. It engages the eye, all right, but ignores the serious dance fan’s need for more than the facile visual fix—for a physical and emotional resonance that will accompany the images and last after they’ve vanished.

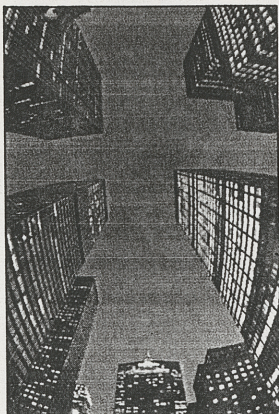
Dance Theater Workshop was the perfect venue for **Dean Moss**, specializing as it does these days in the multimedia work now common in postmodern performance. Moss meshes his choreography with video. His new *Commodities*, *Identities* and *Synchronized Swimming* has two monitors going, flashing isolated shots and sequences that relate obliquely to the live action, itself fairly enigmatic. Inevitably, the monitors go mobile, raiding the dancers’ space. The ploy is common—and it rarely works. It’s well-nigh impossible to watch and make sense of the double bombardment of views, one set canned, the other live; the modes seem to require different ways of looking. And of course multimedia itself is suspect; you wonder whether the artist isn’t spreading himself thin over several genres because he’s incapable of mastering a single one.

With Moss, the choreographic talent is obvious. The material in this piece is reliably spirited and intriguing.

**Bowing down:**  
**Yoshiko**  
**Chuma, with**  
**cello, at**  
**Japan Society.**



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The dancers, astutely costumed by Moss himself as urban ethnics (the gypsies of Avenue A), begin in a lyric vein, linked together, tumbling in fleshy clusters, then segue into rapid moves with a fierce attack. Like almost everyone else in post-modern dance, Moss desperately needs to acquire and employ a sense of structure; he might be pushed to do so if someone took away his TVs.

At its best, **Irene Hultman's** choreography is volatile and voluptuous, as was her dancing with Trisha Brown, a founding mother of postmodernism. Hultman's abilities—related to Brown's signature style, yet gaining in independence—were evident in the brief duet, *Sell Me!*, that opened her concert at St. Mark's Church. Unfortunately, the evening's main event was disappointing: a very long new quintet called *Tango-Babe*, to music by the marvelous New York-Buenos Aires Connection. Here Hultman deconstructed the legendary tango, identifying its steps, gestures, poses, and—most telling—attitudes and setting them in a concert-dance frame. Intellectually, Hultman did a crackerjack job, analyzing the tango's dazzling and seductive elements: the knifelike leg work, the split-second shifts of direction, the stalking, the hauteur, the fiery fusion implied in its embrace. Yet she wasn't able to translate what she understood into contemporary-dance terms and deliver her ideas viscerally; the choreography registered as random notes for a thesis.

**DANCE** Attending a collaborative program of postmodernism's veterans at P.S. 122 was a little like revisiting Woodstock—a nostalgic pilgrimage made in the hope of retrieving remnants of a context that evaporated long ago. **Douglas Dunn, Tina Croll, Wendy Perron, and Kenneth King**, all still doughtily creating work two or three decades after they first entered the scene, offered a representative piece each. Dunn, peculiar and introverted as a hermit, was the hoary older man in a double duet describing a male-female couple in the spring and winter of its relationship; the subject was somewhat Romantic for him—as was the accompanying Rachmaninoff—but he's a sly, secretive fellow and may have meant it all wryly. Both Croll and Perron, in their extended solos, aired performing personas they've been cultivating forever. Croll was the kind of temperamentally complex female nature spirit that you meet in Scandinavian mythology; Perron, wispily lyrical, was involved in the cult of her own fragile beauty. King, as usual, combined spoken text—here pedantic near-gib-

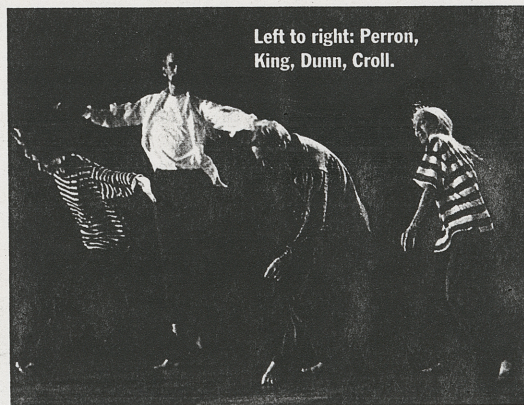
berish on moving and seeing—with dry hieratic gesture; this time out, he projected an elfin quality that made his limited range more endearing. Just when the modest size of these four talents was becoming painfully apparent, the evening ended with a warm, witty joint improvisation so resourceful, it rekindled your faith in the good old days.

The problem with first-generation post-modernism was that it didn't contain the seed for its own development, didn't indicate to its choreographers where they could go next. After gleefully dismantling orthodox premises about dance-making, the rebels and adventurers gradually reclaimed a lot of the old paraphernalia: narrative, conventional themes and feelings, a social conscience, musical accompaniment, designer costumes and sets, commissions from ballet companies, gigs in opera houses. Granted, some of these factors were markedly transformed, but still, there they were again, and the renegades began to look like quirky cousins of Establishment types.

There was one out, which was to walk away from the whole affair. **David Gordon** (performer, dance-maker, director) and his wife, **Valda Setterfield** (dancer and actress), both sixties vanguardists, eventually did their share of hobnobbing with the dance elite, mostly through a connection with Mikhail Baryshnikov, who realized that the most fertile aspect of American choreography in the third quarter of this century lay in the alternatives to classical ballet. Now well into middle age, when the body naturally says no to highly athletic dancing, and with their son, **Ain Gordon**, emerging as a playwright, Setterfield and David Gordon—whose earlier work in dance often featured wordplay—have talked themselves out of dance and into drama.

The three joined forces in a funny and humane piece aptly called *The Family Business*, performed most recently at the New York Theatre Workshop. It deals with the essential, murderous ties of family love and duty, Jewish-style (David is; Valda isn't), and the persistent urge to cut loose.

Gordon *filis et père* jointly wrote and directed, and between them played three generations of the clan, with Gordon senior stunning as the failing, feistily demanding Aunt Annie. Setterfield applied her exquisite aplomb to the bevy of put-upon women who keep daily life running. So many swell things in this piece—fluid transformations, miracles of timing—are rooted in dance, it often seemed as if the perpetrators had never left home.



Left to right: Perron,  
King, Dunn, Croll.