

# Dance



STEVEN CARAS

The ensemble in Robbins' *Eight Lines*, with Ib Andersen in the center

## Smiles of a Winter Night

*Classical troupes get a little help from the avant-garde*

As the popularity of minimalist music spreads and the avant-garde of the '70s pushes further out into the culture, some odd alliances spring up in the artistic landscape. Who would expect to see dancers in the American Ballet Theater stride jauntily onstage carrying ordinary metal folding chairs and proceed to use them as partners? But that is what they do in Choreographer and Performance Artist David Gordon's clever new work—his first ballet ever—called *Field, Chair and Mountain*, and audiences on A.B.T.'s current national tour cheer them on at every performance. In a New York City Ballet premiere last week, Jerome Robbins created a sort of Day-Glo urban paradise in which dancers seemed to cavort almost weightlessly to the celestial scriterings and screechings of Steve Reich's *Eight Lines*.

Both ballets are casual, debonair and refreshingly free of pretension. Gordon, whose own Pick Up Co. uses dialogue as well as tapes and movement in performance, manages to shift smoothly into the more formal vocabulary of classical ballet. *Field, Chair and Mountain* is set to a noisy concerto by the 19th century Irish piano virtuoso John Field (thus the Field in the title). In commissioning the piece, Artistic Director Mikhail Baryshnikov asked only that Gordon use a set, and Gordon came up with an inventive one. Executed with cheeky wit by Santo Loquasto, it unfolds from left to right like a Japanese screen: first a sort of rock field, then above it, an orange mountain on which are painted more folding chairs.

The choreography proceeds prettily much from left to right too. This ballet looks somewhat shallow; it

does not try to fill the stage in a proper Pétipa way. In most other respects it is very much in the classical style. For one thing, it takes very seriously the imperial role of its ballerina, Martine van Hamel. In the past few years Baryshnikov has invited several innovative choreographers to work for A.B.T., and not all have been successful. With her pure, ample style, Van Hamel has been much in demand and as a result has soldiered her way across some very murky terrain. Here she is radiant, a naturally commanding figure. The ballet's astonishing high point comes when her partner, Clark Tippet, promenades her on pointe as she balances on a chair and her extended leg whirls above his head.

Mostly, *Field, Chair and Mountain* is a mesmerizing exploration of partnering. In the first section, ten couples float and bob repeatedly across the stage in supported leaps and lifts. Later, similar moves are



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Van Hamel and Tippet in *Field, Chair and Mountain*  
Taking seriously the imperial role of the ballerina.

made with or on the chairs. Sometimes the mood is lyrical, sometimes genially matter-of-fact or mocking. At one point, inevitably, there is a crisply paced round of musical chairs. It is Gordon's achievement that he unites his whole flurry of inspiration with a skewed but satisfying logic all his own.

In *Eight Lines* the creative exchange is reversed: a classical choreographer goes to the avant-garde for a musical inspiration. Robbins has done this with great success once before, in his 1983 hit, *Glass Pieces*. That ballet was a boldly theatrical vision of city life—densely populated, aggressive, peremptory, endlessly churning. Because their music is superficially quite similar, the two works are bound to be compared. *Eight Lines* is sligher and more evanescent but it is also more intimate and charming, and it is ravishing to look at.

No one, except perhaps Merce Cunningham, is as precise and sophisticated as Robbins about the appearance of his dances. This little romp takes place in a bright, white envelope. The performers wear Florence Klotz's body suits in black (Sean Lavery), white (Ib Andersen) or thrilling primary colors (red for Kyra Nichols, blue for Maria Calegari, lighter blue for the five additional men and pollen-yellow for the female corps of five). With marvelous physical mastery, they whirl and prance, graceful and playful as gods. There is neither poetry nor memory here, just an endless sunny day.

Robbins lets his ballerinas down this time. He pinpointed Nichols' strong classicism and Calegari's dramatic flair early in their careers, but in *Eight Lines*, the two women have impersonal, difficult parts that seem to evaporate. The men are better served, Lavery with wonderfully weighted balances, Andersen with quicksilver darts and turns. This has been Andersen's best season since he arrived five years ago from the Royal Danish Ballet. He has moved through a wide range of repertory looking very much at home yet utterly distinctive: elegant, slightly exotic, confidently musical. As usual Robbins has chosen his ensemble well, mostly from the company's younger dancers, and he has set them blazing on a formidable allegro course.

With brilliant décor and alien music, Robbins gives this ballet a fresh-as-tomorrow look, but the choreography blends fairly closely with two other strong Robbins works now in repertory, *Piano Pieces* and the brief *Andantino*. And as always, Robbins nods to the dances of his mentor George Balanchine, particularly swift, sharply etched *Rubies* and the propulsive *Agon*. He is experimenting with a new kind of music, and how far he will go is unclear. But in the meantime he puts on a hell of a show.

—By Martha Duffy