

A Matter of Resonance

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

AMERICAN BALLET THEATER. At Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center, 362-6000 (May 5 to July 5). Karole Armitage's *The Mollino Room*, David Gordon's *Murder*, John Taras's *Francesca da Rimini*, Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies*, *The Leaves Are Fading*, *Jardin aux lilas*.

David Gordon's new *Murder* also stars Baryshnikov, but while Armitage exploits his dancing prowess, Gordon focuses on his great sense of drama and style. Baryshnikov appears in five, maybe six roles, deftly altering his persona with each quick change.

Murder comes on like a bit of froth, but Gordon, treating a macabrely comic idea with his usual elegance and braininess, turns it into something more.

Not only were the ballet's costumes, props, and set pieces designed by Edward Gorey, its black/white/gray world is (almost) his world. The ballet begins with an unexplained body—a woman in white lying in Lord Smith's parlor. In a hilarious round-robin farce, detailed for us by Valda Setterfield's cool, precise voice, various household members and visitors (all named Smith or variants thereof) enter, stumble over someone else and fall, faint, or get killed, recover, fall, etc. One injured party is hauled to the chaise, just as another feels well enough to rise from it. The stage is a Chinese puzzle of pratfalls and recuperations.

Now a more elaborate and prolonged series of episodes begins—guided along by Baryshnikov's transformations. Hector Berlioz's bombastic and emotional *Symphonie Funèbre et triomphale* pro-

vides wryly apt accompaniment. Here's B as a pale, demented young scientist, drinking a brew, and intermittently writhing in agony during a gentle pas de deux with an improbably blonde wisp in gray (Amy Rose). He dies and is scooped into a coffin brought in by black-clothed men in top hats with mourning veils attached.

With magical speed, he reappears as a sweet, frail lady being inexorably forced into her coffin by stern Clark Tippet. Because B's dancing is truly beautiful and his approach to the character witty but uncondescending, the passage is touching as well as hilarious.

I won't give the whole thing away, but I will mention the ingeniously choreographed duel between B and a postman (John Gardner)—with an anguished lady in white (Anna Spelman) trying to prevent it—which turns into an intricate and absurd pas de trois with revolvers at the ready. The image of the cortège implied in the music is sustained by the men in black, their coffin, mourners (and even a horse) who're always on the scene when a body needs collecting.

At the end, the woman in white kills herself, and, lo, the mysterious body is accounted for. Accounted for? Does anyone ask why there was a hole in the bucket? For the pleasure of making witty and wise remarks on circularity and one thing-leading-to-another. ABT hasn't had a good new comic ballet in a long time. It has one now. With bells on.

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