

New Dances at Juilliard Edition 2004
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by **Susan Reiter**

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Thinking Big



The project is a simple yet ingenious one: assign an established modern dance choreographer to each of the four Juilliard Dance Division classes, and turn them loose to do their thing, with the proviso that all the students in each class must perform in their pieces. After getting off to an invigorating start last year, this second edition of new Dances at Juilliard was a fascinating and often exhilarating evening, enhanced by live musical accompaniment for three of the four works.

At a time when economics often force artists to think small, these choreographers were obliged to think big, creating ensemble works for groups larger than they would usually have available to them. The resulting dances communicated their sense of freedom and possibility at having this opportunity, and could also reconnect with an earlier time in modern dance when sweeping ensemble works made grand statements.

There was an air of reflective melancholy to Janis Brenner's "HeartSTRINGS for 18," an expanded version of an earlier work, performed by the class of 2008. Set to delicate yet robust string quartet arrangements of "Scarborough Fair," the Beatles' "Blackbird" and "Eleanor Rigby," and Led Zepppelin, "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You," this abstract dance was not a specific evocation of the period such 1960s tunes readily evoke. It was very much a study in spatial design, with Ms. Brenner moving the 18 bodies the way a painter might employ his materials, to create a living, breathing, ever-shifting design.

The opening tableau had the full cast standing or otherwise positioned to fill the stage with the four musicians seated among them. After the musicians got up and moved to their downstage corner and introduced the plaintive melody of "Scarborough Fair," the dancers, all wearing black tops and crimson pants, gently scattered into the wings. The first of several variations on the folk tune brought four couples spilling onto the stage in movement that had the suspended, breath-impelled lift and lilt of the Humphrey and Limon style, rather than evoking the quirkier isolations of the Nikolais-Louis tradition in which Ms. Brenner performed as a member of Murray Louis' company. Amid a sense of softly propelled momentum, there were lovely lifts in which one dancer scooped another into the air, as well as more grounded moments such as one when one member of each pair clung to the bent knees of their lunging partners, as though to hold them firm against some impending danger.

The arrangements of the two Beatles songs had a particularly elegiac quality. Amid the gracefully unfolding patterns, one couple occasionally emerged from the ensemble, but the stage picture was always fluidly shifting. The "Eleanor Rigby" section—the one that was new for this Juilliard version of the piece—was the most developed, with the dancers forming linked lines and shapes that tapped beautifully into the music's churning, wistful tension, and then stopping abruptly at the final note, into a scene frozen in time.

The pictorial sense dominated throughout the work, and at times, Ms Brenner's focus on the visual left it somewhat lacking in organic energy, so that the movement existed to create a design rather than to express an internal urgency. But the piece had a quiet elegance and provided the freshman class with an ideal, unpretentious opportunity.



Susan Marshall's "Working Memory," for the class of 2007, seemed propelled by a conceptual framework that never quite explained itself, yet remained intriguing in its evasiveness. When the curtain rose, a row of ten downstage music stands held texts that two dancers, later joined by others, stood and studied. The initial pair might have been partners in a scene study class, exploring the possibilities of their script. Gradually, the rest of the stage space became illuminated, and a total of 24 dancers, wearing practice clothes in grey, white and soft blues,

began to fill the stage, performing crisp, clinical movement with the air of having been assigned urgent tasks.

Richard Einhorn's "The Silence," performed expertly in the pit by eight Juilliard string players, provided a vibrantly rhythmic, gently disturbing accompaniment. Like the choreography, it kept you on edge, never sure what was coming next. An extended sequence in which dancers propelled themselves along the floor, sliding stealthily while lying on their backs, as others rushed in and tried urgently to push against them in an effort to impede their progress, matched the disquieting tension of the music. Ms. Marshall came up with a rich, continuous array of unusual and seemingly disconnected sequences. At one point, between sections, the pages a large book on the remaining music stand turned rapidly, doing their own dance thanks to an invisible wind. In the final section, one small, defenseless man was repeatedly grabbed and manipulated forcefully by five others, and the undefined yet palpably uneasy tone turned darker.

Two men who have recently choreographed for the Ailey company, in addition to having their own groups—Ronald K. Brown and Robert Battle—provided the works for the juniors and seniors. Mr. Brown's "Dancing for Peace" had the some of the gently spiritual tone that often marks his choreography, but his movement palette was less keyed into African-derived movement than it sometimes is. This work for twelve members of the class of 2006 (performed by two alternating casts) had a delicacy and precision that is sometimes lacking in his choreography, which often provides a wash of luscious movement with little context of shape.

For this work only, the music was recorded—understandably, since the two vaguely Arabic-flavored Terry Riley scores were commissioned for the Kronos Quartet and their version was used. The dancers were grouped by color—five in white, two in blue, four in red tops with either white or black pants, and one in yellow—and at times they collectively resembled a Mondrian painting come to life. Their sharply angled arms contrasted with the softer, looser, pelvis-impelled movement for their lower bodies. Mr. Brown deftly incorporated splashes of individuality within the larger communal picture, and the dancers took to his work with vigor and strong projection.

Mr. Battle specializes in modern-day rituals and powerfully focused, intense bursts of movement, and he gave the senior class' 16 students a highly-charged and unusual workout in "Mass," set to a dynamic commissioned percussion score by John Mackey. Six musicians filled the upstage area behind the dancers, and their array of instruments and sounds was a terrific show in itself.

Wearing rust-brown gospel choir-style robes with subtly varied patterns, the ensemble gradually filled the stage, entering one, two or a few at a time with side-to-side shuffling steps. Suddenly, everyone fell onto their side except for one petite woman. When they re-grouped into a wedge formation, and gradually shifted to more rapid, energized movement, as the pulsating score also grew louder and more insistent. Battle has a way of sustaining an element of surprise; what happens next is not what you anticipate. It did seem clear, however, that the amazingly tall, focused Corey Scott-Gilbert would inevitably take center stage, as he did for an urgent solo as the rest of the cast surrounded him on three sides.

Keeping the focus on the dancing itself, the program's costuming was simple but always effective, with each work having an appropriately distinctive look. All four works received the notable benefit of Clifton Taylor's sensitive and varied lighting.

Photos:

First: "heartSTRINGS" choreographed by Janis Brenner for the Juilliard first-year dancers. From left to right: Mary Ellen Beaudreau, Collin Baja. Photo credit: Rosalie O'Connor.

Second: "Working Memory" choreographed by Susan Marshall for the Juilliard second-year dancers. From left to right: Andrew Murdock, Michelle Mola, Douglas Letheren. Photo credit: Rosalie O'Connor.

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