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A Rite, a recall: Bill T. Jones and Anne Bogart's collective riff on Stravinsky at BAM

Thursday
3-Oct-13
07:30pm

 **BAM: Howard Gilman Opera House,**
New York City, NY
A Rite

A Rite
 (Music: Stravinsky, Ch: Jones/Bogart)

Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company
SITI Company

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At the outset of last century, the collision of the creative minds of the composer Igor Stravinsky and the choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky gave birth to what was to become the legendary *Le Sacre du Printemps* ("The Rite of Spring"). When the work premiered in Paris exactly 100 years ago, the critical mass of what was (at the time) an unconventional composition, groundbreaking choreography, and the pagan subject matter, blew a massive hole through the complacency of the bourgeoisie, causing an uproar in the theatre during the



performance so loud that the dancers could not hear the score, and the riot spilled into the street and continued into the night. The effects of the microcosmic revolution that happened that night rippled in time, anticipating other revolutions, in the politics, sciences and the arts alike, including the onset of World War I just a year later, quantum physics and the advent of the film industry as the dominant form of mass entertainment in the century to come.

Fast forward 100 years: all of these notions are intriguingly explored through a highly successful collision of another two luminary artists working in 21st-century America, the theatre director Anne Bogart and the iconic choreographer Bill T. Jones. On the occasion of the New York premiere of the ensuing work, *A Rite*, presented as part of this year's Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, it is evident that the two companies dug deep into the fabric of the original score, embarking on an avid investigation intent on discovering the notions at the very core of the piece that made it so vibrant at the time it was created, and how that vitality could be made relevant to very different audiences that are experiencing it a century apart from its creation.

Each in her/his own right, Bogart and Jones are masters of their game, and clearly they know the audiences they are reaching out to. They understand that rather than attempting to come up with (yet another) interpretation of *The Rite*, it is infinitely more compelling to create a

work that revolves around it, examining its origins, its context and its influence. The resulting work is a truly harmonious medium between dance and theater, tremendously aided by a solid dramaturgical structure and supported throughout with highly accomplished choreography. Predictably – and I don't mean that in a pejorative way – the theatrical set-up of the piece is provided by Bogart's ensemble, mainly through the recurring interventions of the core characters in the piece, an endearingly nerdy musicologist arrestingly portrayed by Ellen Lauren (whose narration provides just the right amount of historical context and musical interpretation, and humorously so), and Will Bond's unnamed soldier who seems to be stuck in a limbo of loss and destruction. Another standout performance is delivered by the kinetic spitfire that is Jenna Riegel of the Jones company: whenever/wherever she is on stage, the eyes can't help but follow – and I promise you it is not just her jet-engine red hair!

A Rite alternates as a rapid, unpredictable, cinematic montage of narrative scenes that lay out much of the work's context, interspersed with choreographic sections in which the performers' movement embodies the musical structure of Stravinsky's score – most evident perhaps in a section in which Lauren's musicologist character, cozily seated on a stool downstage, avidly explains the circular structure of the music, followed by the ensemble performing sparse iterations of entrances and exits from the three portals in the upstage wall, ensuing in a fascinating permutation of couplings – an intricately constructed minuet of sorts. The company – the companies, I should say: both Jones' and Bogart's – are seamlessly integrated to the point where it's nearly impossible to tell them apart. Not only is the ensemble work strong, the joy of performing together shines through their collective endeavor and is a pure pleasure to witness. In an evocative section, Akiko Aizawa recites a Japanese poem: as her voice transforms into a voiceover, the ensemble moves the stools around to create a path ahead for her to tread on, next moving the stools up in the air and helping lift her up to create the illusion of hers walking on air. In similar ways, the sparse stage décor – a handful of props, an old piano, and a multitude of stools (particularly the latter) – are put to highly inventive use throughout.

The ebb and flow of the scenes evokes the notion of memory, which is very much at the core of this work. Moments from the past are conjured, made manifest, only to then recede in the background and be overtaken by newer ones, in an ongoing succession of one's individual perception of reality. While the accomplishment of the two companies working together is difficult (and unnecessary) to separate, I have to remark that the editing of the piece bears a distinctly Bogartean auteur touch, propelling the work at a steady pace that elevates it to a compelling theatrical accomplishment.

Submitted by **Ivan Talijancic** on 9th October 2013

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