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# Bodies and Voices Riff on ‘Rite of Spring’

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — A hundred years on “The Rite of Spring” has become a popular commodity: not just Stravinsky’s score but the whole idea of its neobarbaric modernism and the myths surrounding its scandalous premiere. Like most dance critics, I’m all too used to seeing stagings of “The Rite” that trivialize its complexity: they coast on its music’s force without investigating its ingredients.

The ready accessibility of such a famously difficult work — the way its shock has become chic — is part of the subject of “A Rite,” a remarkable, often irritating and sometimes haunting new theater piece by the theater director Anne Bogart, the choreographer Bill T. Jones, and Janet Wong, the associate artistic director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. A hybrid, with actors and dancers, it recalls the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch in the way its performers talk as much as they move and make their individual personalities highly theatrical (and these also sing). Really, though, the way it deconstructs “The Rite” recalls enthralling pieces like David Gordon’s “[Dancing Henry Five](#)” (2004, about Shakespeare’s “Henry V”) and Katie Mitchell’s “[Waves](#)” (2006, about Virginia Woolf’s novel “The Waves”).

Carolina Performing Arts presented the work at the end of last week at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, as part of a [yearlong series](#) presenting multiple versions of “The Rite” and new works based on it. I saw a sparsely attended preview on Friday, when the official world premiere would have taken place had not bad weather, with frozen rain and black ice on the roads, stepped in. Though modifications may continue (the production reaches New York this year), no structural changes were made for Saturday’s successfully attended performance. In any event, Friday’s showing ran without a hitch.

Its flaws, if you regard them as such, are obvious — some of them are certainly deliberate — and yet they prove only incidentally irksome. The greatest virtue of the piece, however, is simply that it honors Stravinsky’s music; I left the theater hungry to hear the full score again. (Heaven knows this is not the effect of most “Rite” stagings.)

The music is played in both a modern recording and a crackling old one. The performers sing parts of it — a marvelous effect. You also hear the score twisted into popular music — not coarsely turned into the dance music of the 21st century but subtly tipped over into jazz, accompanied by the Charleston and the Lindy (suggesting that Stravinsky’s deliberate primitivism actually contained the seeds of the coming Jazz Age).

You’re lectured by a bespectacled scholar (played by Ellen Lauren) about different aspects of the work (a device intentionally absurd, always bizarre, sometimes annoying, occasionally enlightening). In the worst scenes a soldier (Will Bond) lives out his World War I shell shock, implying both that “The Rite” anticipated mortar bombs and machine-gun fire and that its original audience’s reaction was like that of men in the trenches. Both Ms. Lauren and Mr. Bond, members of Ms. Bogart’s SITI Company, lay their impersonations on thick, but, whereas Ms. Lauren’s musicologist, with her twanging tones, becomes multidimensional and leads us into the music (she grows endearingly awe-struck by its genius), Mr. Bond’s distressed Army character, with his meandering anguish, is primarily an exercise in overwrought acting.

Nijinsky’s 1913 [choreography](#) is very much part of the mix. The production starts with a group (in modern street clothes but barefoot) reiterating, both at different times and simultaneously, famous images from the Chosen Maiden’s final solo of immolation: the trembling knees, the fist pounded on the floor, the anguished hand on the forehead, the deranged tilts of head and torso, the manual clutching of a single thigh. What once was unique is now widely reproduced: “A Rite” makes this central point about “The Rite” straightaway.

The overlaps between acting and dancing are pronounced. Even when you work out which performers come from the

Jones/Zane dance company and which come from the SITI Company — not hard in some cases, trickier in others — you're continually struck by how prepared the actors are to move in the same rhythms and shapes as the dancers and how readily the dancers are to speak (in a range of accents). The voices, amplified, project from speakers high above the stage, adding an ingredient of detachment.

The dancing, never virtuoso, is largely for groups small or large; individuals are often lifted in various ways. Though the dances have a general theatrical effectiveness — they're readily watchable — it's hard to see what any of them, beyond that mass-Nijinsky opening, mean to achieve. While the talking sections keep exploding "The Rite" into multiple yet specific directions — some speakers tell us tendentiously of its connections to modern science, for example — the dances are far vaguer. They conjure a modern social world, mixed in race and moving in the democratic idioms of dance postmodernism. They hold the eye, but they deepen the work's expression only in one important way: they show us social orders coming apart and being replaced by new ones.

It's much easier to speak of the acting. Ms. Lauren becomes more pivotal as the work proceeds. Peering at us through her spectacles with head tilted, she rabbits on maddeningly in one spiel after another; she cackles, she drops names (Coco Chanel, Diaghilev) in her often incoherent talk and makes pronouncements about the music as if we all knew who "the Augurs" (characters in the original ballet) were.

But then we hear the music, and her batty talk becomes touching: she, the others and we all become caught up in these astounding chords, rhythms and structures. And when the performers all turn parts of the music into wordless sung chorales, we feel how much Stravinsky's "Rite" has entered into our nervous systems. Although much about "A Rite" is eminently resistible, it is a serious, intricate, multidirectional centennial tribute to a work of art whose spell it deepens.

*"The Rite of Spring" at 100" continues through April 27 in Chapel Hill, N.C. The complete schedule is at [carolinaperformingarts.org](http://carolinaperformingarts.org).*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: January 29, 2013**

*Because of an editing error, schedule information on Monday with a dance review of "A Rite," part of "The Rite of Spring" at 100" series at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, misstated the date the series ends. It is April 27, not Nov. 16.*