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A Rite in San Francisco: Anne Bogart and Bill T. Jones' autopsy on Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*

Sunday
13-Oct-13
03:00pm

[Map](#) Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts: Lam
Research Theater (former Novellus Theatre), San
Francisco, CA
A Rite

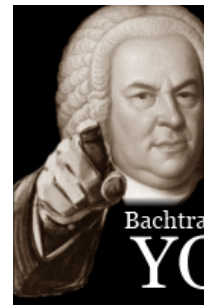
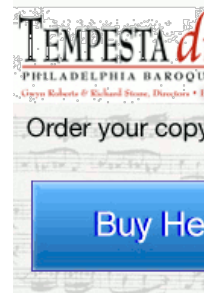
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A Rite
(Music: Stravinsky, Ch:
Jones/Bogart)

**Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane
Dance Company
SITI Company**

I've been humming bits of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* ever since my first encounter with it in my impressionable teens. It stuck in my head, along with the Led Zeppelin anthems. So when the lights went up on Bill T. Jones and Anne Bogart's economically titled *A Rite* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and their marvelous joint troupe of dancer-actors started stomping and clapping and grunting the score, and then singing it wordlessly, it made perfect sense. The gentleman to my right was thumping his foot on the floor and murmuring "Oh yeah". The young lady to my left had never heard it before so was understandably a bit mystified. But she hung in there, fascinated by the hour-long spectacle, as was the rest of Sunday's packed house.

Whatever level of familiarity one brings to this piece of theater, it is undeniably absorbing, if occasionally goofy and bewildering. Its creators have conducted detailed forensics on the music, on the myths and legends surrounding its composition, its hostile reception in 1913 Paris, and subsequent impact on the music and dance worlds. Autopsy complete, the corpse was not stitched back together: Stravinsky's masterpiece has been chopped up, its episodes presented out of order, in several different recordings on top of the cast's magnificent physical and vocal rendering.



It's unlikely that any audience, regardless of how well they know the music or the chequered history of dance homages, will be able to connect all the dots in this compelling performance. I'm not sure it matters. (I'm still puzzling over the snippets of Japanese poetry, the disquisitions on the warping of time and space, and the references to YouTube, Susan Boyle and Occupy Wall Street.) As if mocking the work's own aspirations, actress Ellen Lauren – who plays a delightfully daffy music professor on a mission to enlighten us on Stravinsky's method of composition – at one point lectures to us while her voice is completely drowned out by the taped music, and while the rest of the company rushes around ignoring her.

The genius of this new work lies in the theatrical explication of the social unease that led to the riot at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées on opening night in 1913. The reported stampede was as much a manifestation of the Parisian audience's distaste for Stravinsky's dissonance and Nijinsky's barbaric dance as it was a reflection of a restless, fearful society on the edge of chaos, at the brink of a war that would be fought as no war had previously been fought. Fighter aircraft, automatic machine guns, and poison gas were among the industrial advances that contributed to the unprecedented bloodbaths of World War I. The central character in *A Rite*, a shell-shocked World War I soldier played by Will Bond, keeps reliving the “ra-ta-tat-tat,” which merges into Stravinsky's savage rhythms. By the end of the piece, the pounding rhythms fell each cast member in quick succession, leaving Bond the lone survivor. The final image is of him, imprisoned behind a fence constructed of ribbons of curtain, behind which he desperately runs back and forth, illuminated by strobe lighting.

For all the magnificent dancing on offer – most notably by Antonio Brown and Jenna Riegel who each had a number of impressive cyclonic variations – it is a simple but ingenious theatrical device that resonated most deeply. Akiko Aizawa stepped up on to a stool and stretched one leg out to take a step forward. Another cast member swiftly positioned another stool to catch her step. She continued to walk forward slowly and deliberately, like a parading monarch, as her colleagues raced to pick up stools and place them at the ready for her footfalls. Evoking the famous “ceiling dance” by the greatest dancer of all time, Fred Astaire, in *Royal Wedding* – in which Astaire expressed his joy at being in love by tap-dancing on the walls and ceiling (aided by a revolving set) – Aizawa starts to climb toward the rafters, aided by her comrades who lift her under the arms and position the stools at the appropriate angles so she can continue to step on them. She becomes an angel soaring through space, serene delight on her face.

I came away hoping that Bogart and Jones would tackle other ballet classics: I'm voting for a deconstruction of *Swan Lake*, a piece of music that was hailed as “undanceable” at its 1877 première in Moscow. The inside scoop on Tchaikovsky, whom Russia has yet to officially recognize as its greatest gay composer, and the byzantine tale of *Swan Lake*'s creation should make for exciting theatre. Or the even more tortured saga of the making of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, the composer's struggles with the Stalinist regime and his spiral into depression.

Submitted by **Carla Escoda** on 15th October 2013 

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