

American Document (2010)

nytheatre.com review

Tim Cusack · June 11, 2010

A Whitman sampler of choreographic bon-bons and candy-coated theatrical bits laced with rot gut whiskey, Anne Bogart's and Charles L. Mee's collaboration with the Martha Graham Company, *American Document* (2010), looks back to a rapidly vanishing American past as it points the way toward the future of the American theatre. Freely mixing dancers from Graham's indispensable company with the actors of Bogart's equally influential SITI ensemble, the piece is as much a celebration of the cultural contributions of these two great geniuses as it is an examination of what it means to be an American. Graham revolutionized both 20th century choreography and dance pedagogy with her contraction and release technique; similarly, Bogart's popularization and codification of the Viewpoints have completely transformed the American approach to directing and acting in the 21st century. How appropriate then that these two organizations founded and guided by female visionaries should unite to create this truly groundbreaking piece.

The Whitman referred to above isn't the confectioner, but the great 19th century American poet, whose incantatory optimism is the prevailing mood of the nearly hour-long work. However, Bogart and Mee also never let the audience forget that Walt's enduring language was forged in the fires of one of the most violent periods in American history: the lead-up to and conflagration of the Civil War. In addition to Whitman, they've included text from literary sources as disparate as Sinclair Lewis, Jack Kerouac, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs* (the source for the musical *Oklahoma!*). They've also included passages drawn from Internet blogs written by American soldiers stationed in Iraq that graphically depict atrocities committed against civilians and online rants decrying the presence of Muslims in the United States. Through this wealth of often contradictory source material drawn from the past 150 years of our history, the collaborators

implicitly answer their own question of what it means to be an American.

At the start of the evening, the curtain of the Joyce Theater rises on a stage completely empty except for a single brown leather bag down right. An expansive white wall like a huge, blank screen stretches across the back of the space. What image of ourselves as Americans is about to be projected onto it? Kelly Maurer from the SITI company enters (throughout the piece members of both ensembles are referred to by their actual names) and crosses diagonally down to the satchel. (This diagonal movement cutting the space in half becomes a recurring motif throughout.) Reaching into the bag, she pulls out a book and begins to read Whitman's definition of what an American is. Suddenly the stage is filled with women in bright sundresses and men in the casual clothes associated with American workers (costumes by James Schuette). It feels like a Fourth of July parade, with the "actors" and the "dancers" performing identical unison steps along the diagonal first inscribed by Maurer. One in particular—a little, flexed-foot chasse—is rendered exotic and strange by arms held overhead, bent at the elbows, and with cupped hands reminiscent of Egyptian statuary.

At first it's difficult to tell who belongs with which company, as groups briskly march on and offstage, but subtle details of execution—the degree of torque in a twisted torso, how long feet stay off the ground during a glissade—reveal the trained dancers (although Akiko Aizawa from the acting side of things clearly has had extensive dance experience). No matter—this is meant to be a community of individuals, and everyone's idiosyncrasies are welcome. SITI member Leon Ingulsrud in particular stands out for the purity and charm of his movement. It's perfectly evident that this performer has not spent years in dance classes refining his balletic line (nor does the piece ask you not to notice that), but his equally evident determination to get it right in the best and most honest way possible immediately wins us over to cheer on his efforts. This transparent quality is put to wonderful use during a solo he performs to text from Kerouac about the Diamond Sutra. As Ingulsrud speaks the Beat master's words referencing this Buddhist text concerning the perfectibility of wisdom, Graham company

member Tadej Brdnik stands beside him gently correcting and "perfecting" his positions. It's a lovely moment that leaves the audience giggling with empathy and the recognition that one of the most cherished American narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves is that we have a can-do spirit that allows us to learn new skills no matter what stage of life we're at.

If Ingulsrud breaks our expectations about what a performer in a dance piece is supposed to look like and how they're supposed to move, Stephen Webber and Ellen Lauren demolish our expectations of how a comic bit should be structured. Webber keeps attempting to set in motion the classic Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" routine; Lauren refuses to play along, responding with every imaginable line except the one we all know comes next. Is a shared sense of humor what makes us all Americans? Or is it that we all ultimately come from someplace else—illustrated when the international members of the Graham company begin speaking their native tongues. We may not understand a word of Brdnik's Slovenian, but his suddenly tossing the words "homeland security" and "green card" into his rant earns a big laugh, as does the sight of Aizawa breaking into Japanese with her compatriot, dancer Miki Orihara. Ingulsrud steals their thunder, however, when he joins in (he worked for many years with the Suzuki Company in Japan).

This overall effervescent tone takes a marked detour into the dark side, though, when the cast begins to recite first-person accounts of American war crimes in Iraq, most notably a woman's execution by a platoon leader. As the entire company slows moves toward the audience, Webber bangs the drum hanging around his neck. Individuals sink to the ground in choreographed death throes, only to spring back up and rejoin the carnage. It's a simple, yet chilling effect, and much needed at that moment. After all, our history (like any nation's) is soaked in blood. And as much as I'm a sucker for Copelandesque evocations of the dignity of the common man and the grand sweep of this land, I was beginning to become a mite impatient with the amount of aw-shucks Americana on display. After all, the common man can just as easily be outfitted with a gun and sent off to slaughter suckers somewhere else.

Or here. And that's my only problem with the piece—we don't just act out violently against other countries; we're pretty good at doing it to our own as well. A piece that wants to look at the American character without once mentioning the slave trade, the decimation of native peoples, the seizure of a good chunk of Mexican territory, and the urban nightmare of economic exploitation that was the lives of most poor immigrants seems strangely lacking to say the least.

But that other America, that better America of neighborliness and tolerance and teamwork and innovation is a goal we should all continually strive for. So all is forgiven when the company dances a last joy-filled salute to the America of our better selves to Darron L. West's gently pulsating music. And there were tears in my eyes as they all joined Maurer at the end in a simple arrangement across the stage, each contributing a line from the Whitman poem she started us off with. So many different people from different backgrounds and areas of expertise working together on the stage. Two different groups of performers learning from each other and trying on each other's art for this brief moment. It's a beautiful final image.

So what is an American? It seems we are both a nation that births new forms and cold-blooded killers. But then again ultimately the greatest thing about being an American is that if you disagree with these artists' answer to that question, you can draft your own document.