

# danceviewtimes

October 02, 2007

## Alone on Stage

**The Art of the Solo (2nd Edition)**

**Baltimore Museum of Art**

**Baltimore, Maryland**

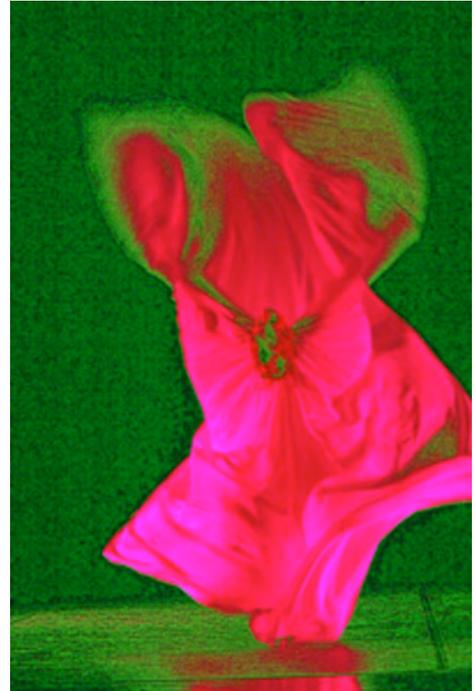
**September 29, 2007**

**by George Jackson**

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The solo is the essence of modern dance. If that pronouncement sounds pompous, forget the wordage and consider the facts. The artform's history can be told thru solos, which isn't so for most other types of dance. For ballet, partnering is quintessential and charting its course requires at minimum the pas de deux. The story of social dancing also needs the pair, at least since the birth of the waltz; for earlier examples it takes a small assembly of bodies. The solo, though, lends itself to individuality and economy. Individuality is the great motivating reason for modern dance; economy is the tough condition to which modern dance has had to adapt. Now, following the success of last year's program of solos from about a century's worth of possibilities, there's not only been a sequel but plans have been announced by Mino Nicolas, whose brain-and-guts child the project is, for a third edition on September 20, 2008. Version 2 of "Solo" reprised a few of last year's favorites, yet much on this program of dances from the past was undeservedly unfamiliar. If there was a shift of emphasis, it was that male choreographers were better represented.

Not simple, not stark, not entirely in earnest was Alwin Nikolais's "Sorcerer". One could get sea sick focusing on what looked like a figure tossed about in a life raft on rough seas. Did Nikolais intend to suggest that a wizard can become as out of control in his magic circle as is a shipwreck survivor without oars? Perhaps I made that association at random. No question, though, that this giddy 1983 piece was fun – with its music, lighting and, presumably, suspension mechanics for both the Sorcerer and his "life raft" by the multitalented Nikolais. The humor





continued into the curtain calls when the Sorcerer appeared with enough disguise removed to look male no longer but like Jayne Bernasconi. There was contrast between this Nikolais and Jose Limon's sparse, and controlled "Two Preludes". Limon, working from a pair of Scriabin piano pieces, suggested two states of being – contemplation and determination. To be shown in its entirety, this study of moods required guess work for there is direct evidence (a silent film) about only the second half; the first half has been constructed by Mino Nicolas based on the account of Eleanor King, who shared the program on which Limon premiered the dance. Together, the original and the re-imagined parts make a plausible whole.

Murray Louis's set of four studies, "Frail Demons", is dynamically between Nikolais's agitation and Limon's regulation. The lighting and music were, again, Nikolais's. I especially liked the second Demon whose body the choreographer seemed to dissect ever so systematically in terms of movement. Peter Kyle, a warm performer and handsome man, caught some of Limon's dignity as well as Louis's impish nature in his renditions.

Hanya Holm's 1976 choreography on the Gustav Mahler / Friedrich Rueckert songs, the "Kindertotenlieder", isn't as well known as Antony Tudor's of 1937 which he called "Dark Elegies". Although Tudor's ballet is remarkable (the sense of a communal sorrow, a use of point work as burrowing as in Nijinska's "Les Noces" yet not as stern), it does not suit the music and poetry in one major respect. Mahler and Rueckert's sorrow is personal, individual, upper middle class and richly sensual whereas Tudor's is proletarian, shared and a bit drab. Holm at least shows an individual's grief. The dull red stretch dress worn by the woman was, though, too austere for the music's lush tones. Kim Gibilisco danced the woman in Claudia Gitelman's staging of Holm's reach-and-retract movement for the second of the songs and did so with strength. Holm gave her entire, 5 part set the title of "Homage to Mahler" and made the torso more emphatic than Doris Humphrey had done in her 1930 "The Call / Breath of Fire". In the Humphrey, it was Dana Martin's limbs that caught the eye and conversed with Dane Rudhyar's music.

That three of the early moderns – Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St.



Denis – were temperamentally distinct wasn't in doubt with Elizabeth Lowe Ahearn, Jeanne Bresciani and Cynthia Word embodying their dances. Ahearn's Fuller was a moth in flight around a flame ("La Danse du Feu", 1896). The motion was light (despite Wagner's Valkyrie music) and Ahearn seemed drawn into the dance helplessly yet almost dispassionately. Emotion poured like lava from Bresciani's Isadora although the flow was sometimes ponderous ("3 Dances to Chopin: Revolutionary Etude, Polonaise Militaire, Gypsy Mazurka"). Word's Miss Ruth is so sensually in love with herself that we too are aroused. Having perfected St. Denis's "The Purdah / Sprit of Incense", which she danced last time too, Word's version of the 8 brief solos of "Radha" requires more polish, particularly in

timing some of movement to selections from Leo Delibes' "Lakme" music. "Radha" closed the evening and its billowing smoke, pedestals, throne, flowers and dramatic lighting, added up to something of a production number. Fuller, Duncan and St. Denis – despite the simplicity of their dances – seem closer to today's sensibilities than the next couple of generations of moderns with their morally, emotionally and politically correct notions.

Also on the program were two more repeats from 2006: Ted Shawn's 1919 "Priest of Knossos" and Pola Nirenska's 1994 "Exuberance". In the Shawn, Mathew Heggem kept stances neatly flattened, balances poised and gave a hopping step cushioned landings. Schandelmeier keeps this solo Nirenska made for her fresh by dancing it a little differently every time; on this occasion she stressed spontaneity and vigor. Scheduled but not danced was another repeat, Mary Wigman's "Witch Dance".

In the printed program for "The Art of the Solo", Mino Nicolas lists the sources for these revivals and doesn't hide the fact that some things have to be re-imagined.

All photos by Kanji Takeno: Elizabeth Lowe Ahearn flaming as Loie Fuller; Peter Kyle as José Limón; Cynthia Word enflowered as Ruth St. Denis.