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DANCE NOTES FROM CHICAGO, NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

I. CHICAGO
ELIOT FELD BALLET
AUDITORIUM THEATRE

Among the more interesting current happenings in American ballet is the work of Eliot Feld. Feld and Company brought their dancing to the Auditorium Theatre from January 23 to 25. The matinee on January 25th included "The Real McCoy (1974)," "The Consort (1970)," and "Excursions (1975)." Feld's dancers, who include former Wisconsinite Naomi Sorkin, participate in a no-star arrangement and are of exquisite quality.

Feld's "Real McCoy" is enigmatic. It presents itself in the slickest of forms -- polished vaudeville song and dance, top hat, cane, with the assistance of a sultry lady who is wheeled onto the stage poised on a richly text red blue chaise. The choreography is highly entertaining and it is pleasant to "settle in" to the cool, blusey music of George Gershwin. But the effects represent only the surface appearance. The dancing is beautifully phrased so that the movement images are themselves fully compelling. The dancers, Feld, Michael Hughes and five other men are so completely connected that the effect of their dancing is as near to perfection as a choreographer might hope. The dancers move together like the parts of a flawless system. But something more is happening. Toward the end of the piece you get the feeling that the entire illusion that has just been brought to perfection is on the verge of exploding or is about to change radically. It is as if Feld is taking conventional dance forms to their highest levels and then showing their dissolution before our very eyes. The collapse of an era of dancing is particularly suggested in Feld's performance of the final solo of "The Real McCoy." He comes on stage, adjusts his gear as if to repeat the dance he did at the beginning of the work. But the tone is different and instead of a repeat we see the unmistakeable suggestion of disintegration and change.

Feld is at ease with the vocabularies of soft shoe, classical ballet, and many aspects of modern dance. He carries them to their limits, shakes out, and initiates possibilities for new ways of using the established movement vocabularies. The style that emerges eludes classification. Dance is changing, evolving new forms, and its transformations are the themes of Feld's ballets.

II. NEW YORK
GUS SOLOMONS DANCE COMPANY
AMERICAN THEATRE LABORATORY

Gus Solomons Jr., a New York choreographer, came to dance from a background in architecture. After a series of professional experiences with the companies of Martha Graham, Pearl Lang, Merce

Cunningham, and others, he formed his own company in 1971. The company performed "Statements of Nameless Root (1975-76)" and a premiere of "Conversations" at the American Theatre Lab, February 19-22. "Statements" consisted of two parts. "Observations" was danced by Solomons and "Conclusions" was danced by the company members. These abstract dances deal with the body in space, employing the concepts of a game-like structure.

The setting is very sparse: lights on, lights out, as Solomons moves in minimalist style: sometimes just the long, sweeping arms move or the head turns. Again, the arm acts as a pendulum, swinging back and forth. On the floor, Solomons turns exploring various parts of his body with a detached curiosity. Extending his full length, he lies flat on the floor; his only movement is to smile. Despite the sparcity, the movement is infused with the personal warmth of the dancer thus softening the otherwise stark presentation.

For the "Conclusions" section of "Statements," Solomons adds electronic music and five bodies, thus making the explorations of bodily interactions with space more complex. The choreography sustains itself, but the additional dancers do not retain the high standard set by Solomons.

"Conversations" with sound score and words for eight dancers introduces a new game. The same abstract time/space concerns are here, but their presence is humanized to a greater degree by the smiles on the dancers' faces, and by the quality of joy that they exchange in carrying out the game. Foot stamping, allusions to folk dance idiom, and occasional caricature of ballet movements reflect a departure from "pure movement." A tape at the end of the dance puts in words the concept, in case it was missed.

Solomons himself is a fine dancer, tall, well built, and a choreographer with brilliant dance concepts. Even when he is standing perfectly still, he is a joy to watch. Unfortunately his choice of company members does not reflect the best of the talent pool that New York offers.

III. WASHINGTON, D.C.
PAUL TAYLOR
LISNER AUDITORIUM

Paul Taylor's Twentieth Anniversary Season concert at the Lisner Auditorium in Washington, D.C., March 26, included "Sports and Follies (1974)," "Three Epitaphs (1956)," "From Sea to Shining Sea (1965)," and a premiere of "Runes." The remarkable thing about Taylor's choreography is that whether it is from 1956, 1965 or 1976, the works are as current as if they were done yesterday. Taylor's Thurberesque humor, his sense of theatre, and his excellent company of dancers never fail to provide a rich dance experience. His works seem to bear endless repetition without loss of significance or vitality.

"Sports and Follies" shows the dancers, as athletes engaged in a one-up manship showoffish frivolity. Lady wrestlers, shadowboxers, and a ballerina performing a very unlady like split vie for attention. The mock procession of victors has the quality of the procession form the opera "Aida." Black costumed figures shuffle, bump, grind, and lope across the stage like dead souls in "Three Epitaphs." The complete body suits, designed by Robert Rauschenberg, mask

all but the ironic humor in the dance. I was surprised to note that "From Sea to Shining Sea" was first performed in 1965 because it anticipates so well the bicentennial spirit that other choreographers are obliged to address in this season. The piece provides a satire of American culture which finds the sacred Statue of Liberty fallen and enclosed in compromising circumstances. An American flag is unfurled upside down in the crotch of a dancer. The "American family" intermittently mills about in bathrobes in puzzlement and distress.

"Runes" is described by Taylor as "secret writings for use in casting a spell." The piece is very ritual-like in quality. Near the beginning, the dancers encircle a single body lying on the floor apparently in a spell of or dead. Eventually the figure on the floor becomes part of the moving dance, and later on is replaced by a girl who lies in a similar position. The setting is lighted in blue with a prominently placed moon that marks the advances in time as it moves upward from low (stage right) to high (stage center). The solos in "Runes" are vigorous, exhibiting the high technical skills of the dancers. Gone is Taylor's humor and replacing it is a mysterious, eerie feeling that borders on trafficing with the occult.

After twenty years, Taylor still remains and refines his own dance and magic. He introduces no radical changes but sustains his high artistic standards and continues to produce dances that remain among the most imaginative offerings of theatrical dancing.