

1-1-1977

Toby Armour and the New England Dinosaur

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

Toby Armour and the
New England Dinosaur
February 20-22, 1977

Toby Armour and the New England Dinosaur Dance Company made their first Wisconsin appearance during Marquette University's Fine Arts Week, February 20-22. Armour appeared in a solo performance of "Romantic and Animal Meditations" on Sunday afternoon with pianist Ricard Busch. This hour-long movement collage is set to musical selections including Liszt's "Five Hungarian Dances", "Piano Piece", "En Reve", and "Mephisto Waltz No. 4", Bartok's "Mikrokosmos" and "Five Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm", and compositions by contemporary composers Ezra Simms and the pianist Busch.

Armour's largo movements, slow and dignified, created an instant aura of mystery and expectancy. Her tall, angular frame accented in a black, lacy costume imposes itself on the space of the ballroom as she walks, lopes, then weaves a continuous tapestry while the music chan-

ges in dynamics and in tempo. Her long and flexible limbs evoke awe and admiration as she combines head, arms, and legs into unthinkable human shapes. Sometimes it is painful to imagine yourself in similar positions. Her head is as likely to appear between her legs as in its usual place. They become at will the tentacles of preying insects or undefined animal forms. The shapes are impressive for their variety of form, but their ability to convey changing emotions of anxiety, whim, affection are remarkable. Feeling and form are beautifully orchestrated whether in large flowing sweeps of the arms, or in one of the many elegantly sculptured moments of the meditation.

The New England Dinosaur Company with dancers Sally Lewiecki, Elizabeth Mallinckrodt, Michael Mao, and Mike Meyer, is directed by Ms. Armour. Meyer, incidentally, is formerly from Milwaukee and is now performing with dance companies in Boston and New York. The company's February 22 concert included four of Armour's works: "Black Breakfast, 1974", "Overture, 1976", "March, 1976", and a premiere performance of "Hup, 1977". The dancers are very good and the concert affirms Armour as a first-rate choreographer. Her concepts are clear and the movement is very clean.

"Hup" begins and ends with tennis balls being tossed from the wings into the performance area. All four company members perform to a low-key African drum score provided by Boston composer Ezra Simms. The dancers perform in groups, sometimes struggling together, sometimes with three against the fourth. The movement is varied with hops, and chain-like processings standing out. In chain-like series, the dancers exert tremendous energy and create an illusion of struggle. A push-and-shove effect evokes a feeling of intensity as the dancers interact. "Hup" is very rich in suggestive imagery. The figures marching in a single file recall a procession of human figures at the end of Bergman's film "The Seventh Seal", and at other moments the depersonalized human forms of the dancers relate to the machine imagery of a Leger painting.

However one reads the imagery, "Hup" is a very strong dance.

"Black Breakfast" is a psychological fantasy piece with three characters, or one character and two representations of her fantasy life. The set includes a bed on which one of the girls remains throughout the dance, lying on her stomach and facing the audience. Her movements are very small, but potent, consisting of compulsive hand manipulations and fondling of the clothes strewn about the bed. The other dancers, a man and a woman, stroll, dress, undress, make love, and quarrel in the space around the bed. For the most part, the two do not interact with the girl on the bed until the end of the dance when they dump a pile of clothes on her. The piece is well constructed, slightly absurdist, and theatrical in character.

"March" is an experiment in choreographic sculpture. Two male dancers alternate the practice of shaping each other and then carrying the product. Two breezy girls in red and white striped blouses contrast with the droopy men in jeans. The phrasing in this work is very nice, but I preferred "Hup" and "Black Breakfast" for their overall effect.

Toby Armour and the New England Dinosaur offer fine dancing and excellent choreography, and they are still in the affordable category for modestly-budgeted organizations. They know what dancing is about and how to go about it. I, for one, would like to see them in Wisconsin again --and soon.

--Curtis L. Carter

