

LETTER FROM NEW YORK AND AUTUMN BLEEDS THE WINE

THE HEISEI NAKAMURA-ZA KABUKI
TROUPE, ANNE-TERESA DE
KEERSMAEKER, MARK MORRIS DANCE
COMPANY

BY MARINA HARSS

Firstly, I'd like to express how grateful I am to Alexandra Tomalonis for inviting me to write for *DanceView*, for her close and careful reading, for the jovial editing sessions over the phone that inevitably led to long and happy powows about the present and future state of dance. And also for her generosity, enthusiasm, and steady encouragement. In the short time I've written for her I've learned an awful lot about writing and thinking about dance. I've always found *DanceView* to be handsome, serious without being heavy-handed, well-written, and fun to read. And all, thanks to Alexandra.

Perhaps it's time to talk about some dance. The **Lincoln Center Festival** was particularly dance-heavy this year. In addition to the Bolshoi Ballet—about which you can read elsewhere in the issue—the lineup included both Kabuki and four early works by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's Brussels-based company Rosas. August brought the Mostly Mozart Festival, and with it, Mark Morris's staging of Händel's pastoral opera *Acis and Galatea*. That production, with musical accompaniment provided by Nicholas McGegan's Philharmonia Baroque and Chorale, had its première in Berkeley in the spring.

The **Heisei Nakamura-za Kabuki** troupe arrived at the Rose Theatre July 7-12 with a play entitled *The Ghost Tale of the Wet Nurse Tree*. Kabuki isn't principally a dance form, but the stylized and controlled use of the body is one of its central features. It was developed in the early seventeenth century by ladies of the night who used their art to entertain and attract clientele. By the middle of that century, the authorities had banned women—too provocative—so men took over their roles, inventing the refined art of the *onnagata*, or female impersonator? Unlike Noh, kabuki is and always has been a popular art,

like boulevard theatre. Also like the *théâtre du boulevard*, it is both highly formalized and fairly un-profound. The stories contain adventures and ghostly apparitions, chance meetings and betrayals; they're bawdy and funny and full of mad twists. The action is accompanied by music played on the three-stringed *shamisen*, wood blocks, and drums, as well as chanting. As in *commedia dell'arte*, the characters are types, each with its repertory of moves and tricks.

Kabuki companies tend to be family fiefdoms; the Heisei Nakamura-za troupe has been run by the same dynasty of performers for eighteen generations. The two men currently in charge are brothers, both young and, on the evidence of this show, very talented. (Their father, who ran it before them, recently passed away. He was in his fifties.) Nakamura Shichinosuke is an *onnagata*, oval-faced, falsetto-voiced, hyper-feminine, modest and deliberate in his movements. His elder brother, Nakamura Kankuro, specializes in the almost magical art of playing several characters at once (*keren*), switching identities with blinding speed. In an onstage battle, he fights both sides; all he needs is a tuft of grass or a parasol to disappear, slip on a change of clothes (and a new wig), and reappear as his own opponent. Or he might leave the stage and reappear somewhere else before you know what's hit you. How does he do it? In *The Ghost Tale* he plays not two, but three characters, all as unlike as they could be. One is a distinguished artist, another a semi-comic servant, and the third a tattooed desperado. They wear different clothes, move differently, and speak in different voices. (Instead of supertitles, the troupe opted for simultaneous translation over headphones, a nuisance.) I'll confess it took me some time to figure out that all these characters were being impersonated by the same man.

The other lead character is a comic-strip villain, played by the impressive Nakamura Shido. With his porcelain face makeup and pencil-thin eyebrows, he looked like a Samurai in a Japanese scroll. His sinister eyes, red-rimmed and unblinking, emitted a cold gleam. His movements were as practiced and controlled as those of a dancer. In his first entrance, his face was hidden under what looked like an enormous lampshade. With a tilt of the head, he revealed those veiled, reptilian eyes. The crowd erupted in applause. Later, he froze in a series of dramatic poses, like extreme closeups in a Spaghetti Western.

The costumes were a spectacle in themselves, though in this production there were none of the flashy on-stage costume-changes (*hikinuki*) one sometimes sees. The stage, set up more or less as in a traditional Japanese theatre, was equipped with steps down into the orchestra seating that permitted the actors to enter and exit through the house. (Kabuki theatres use runways to facilitate entrances.) Old-fashioned painted flats set the scene: a garden in springtime, a coffee-house, a temple, a waterfall. A stone outcrop spouted actual water. In the eighteenth century, shows with water were performed on hot summer nights; the waterworks served both to entertain and to cool off the crowd. But, despite the brothers' deference to tradition, there was nothing at all stodgy or remote about this rendition of *The Ghost Tale*. Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, father of the current directors, was an innovator.

The actors are young, and the atmosphere is tongue-in-cheek; a couple of comic players engage in chatty, up-to-date repartee—in English!—during set-changes. Too much? Perhaps the updating is little self-conscious, but it's invigorating to experience an ancient art form as something modern, familiar, unabashedly entertaining. Certain values, it seems, are universal: humor, craft, surprise.

In this supernatural revenge play, filled with twists and turns, the final *coup de grace* is dealt by a child, the youngest member of the company, already an accomplished and graceful actor. This tradition seems to be in good hands.

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With her hyper-precise, pared-down approach, the Belgian choreographer **Anne-Teresa De Keersmaecker** has reached a kind of semi-sainted status among European dancemakers. De Keersmaecker combines the minimalism of the American post-modernists (Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs) with a knowing tanztheater theatricality. In each of the four works performed at the Lincoln Center Festival, the choreographer has selected a small repertory of movements and found ways to combine and recombine them to the point of exhaustion. By the end of *Fase*, *Rosas danst Rosas*, *Elena's Aria*, and *Bartók/Mikrokosmos*



Nakamura Shido and Nakamura Shichinosuke in *The Ghost Tale of the Wet Nurse Tree*. Photo: Shochiku

Samantha van Wissen,
member of Anne Teresa
De Keersmaecker dance
company Rosas, performs
in Elena's Aria. Photo:
Stephanie Berger

the dancers are covered in sweat, disheveled, and limp. The audience feels similarly. In my experience, more people leave De Keersmaecker's shows than those of any other choreographer.

So what, then, is the fascination? Well, for one, the movements are so

crisply and beautifully executed. Little pivots, so quick that one hears the *whoosh* of the body as it cuts through the air. Swinging sashays that capture the femininity and sexual frisson of a Rita Hayworth dance routine. Also, her dancers are interesting to watch: big, strong women who look out at us with complete presence of mind. There's aggression, coyness, curiosity, intelligence, and a touch of raunchiness in their attitude. They're intimidating. And De Keersmaecker, who, at 54, is still dancing, is the most intimidating of them all.

The arc of the four pieces, composed in quick succession in the early eighties, goes more or less like this: *Fase* is an exploration of form; *Rosas* applies that form to a kind of manifesto of adolescent female sexuality; *Elena's Aria* unveils a chasm of desire and sadness lying beneath the veneer of the feminine mystique; and *Bartók/Mikrokosmos* is a more conventional, musically-driven application of the choreographer's sharp, rigorous style. The latter was the only piece to include a man, and the only one to contain extended passages of classical music (by Ligeti and Bartók). These two factors automatically soften the contours of De Keersmaecker's uncompromising style.

The best of the lot is still the first, *Fase*, from 1982. Like early Trisha Brown, it gives off a charge of excitement, the excitement of an artist finding a groove and testing it out for the first time. The insistent repetition of short looping phrases is exasperating, to be sure, but in this case there is something almost sublime about that exasperation. We want each section of the dance to end,



desperately, but at the same time we're delighted by it and want it to continue just a bit longer. We become fascinated by the minute variations in pattern, try to predict them, then submit to their unpredictability. And we can't help but be smitten by the relentlessness of the piece's composition, the crispness of its execution, and the way it matches Steve Reich's equally maddening music.

Rosas Danst Rosas, De Keersmaecker's hit from 1983, suits the strengths of her company and shamelessly exploits the charisma of her bobby-socked dancers. They sit, sprawl, trade glances, push their hair away from their temples, pull at their shirts to show a bit of skin. The characters seem to be schoolgirls waiting for something, anything, to happen. There is a distinct air of sexual tension. I was particularly struck by Tale Dolven: big-boned, athletic, tall, alternatively sensual and plain. She's compelling without seeming to care too much about what we think of her. Even so, the petulant tone of the piece, which could be set in a school detention hall, becomes grating. But it has a strong sense of style. One can see why it has been so widely quoted and imitated. Beyoncé used some of its moves in a music video not long ago. It has attitude and a naughty kind of sizzle.

Elena's Aria, with its reiterated images of female dejection set to intermittent snatches of Victrola opera recordings and, later, excerpts from a speech by Che Guevara, is more indulgent. Here, as women play with their hair (again), stumble across the stage in constricting cocktail dresses and high heels—shades of Pina Bausch—or sit dejectedly in yet more chairs, the tightly-wound De

Keersmaecker model wears wearily thin. The piece is a bore, relieved only by the concentrated emotion of Caruso's voice in faint, crackling recordings of *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and *Santa Lucia*. If only there were more Caruso and less rolling around.

The next piece in the series, *Bartók/Mikrokosmos*, is like a cleaning of the slate, a return to pure dance. The stage is empty with the exception of two concert grands and two dancers, wearing stern black outfits. The novelty in this first section, which consists of seven short pieces for two pianos by Bela Bartók, is the presence of a man (Jakub Truszkowski). It is intriguing to see how his heavier, more lumbering physique affects the dynamics of De Keersmaecker's movement style. (It's less sharp, softer.) For the first time, dancers touch and give off the slightest hint of an emotional bond, even love. (In *Elena's Aria* they only *talk* about love and mope about its absence.) But for the most part, they simply move to the music, echoing its strong rhythms and pointed accents. There are sock-hop-like passages and swinging sashays reminiscent of movie musicals, but the woman's schoolgirl dress and heavy black boots are pure De Keersmaecker. The mood is a little bit dour, a little bit cheeky. In the second half, the man departs and four women spin, glide, and smoothe their

hair to more Bartók, this time a quartet for strings. *Bartók/Mikrokosmos* is solid, but generic. After *Fase*, the rest of the Keersmaecker retrospective feels like an anti-climax.

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News of Mark Morris's *Acis and Galatea* has been trickling into New York since April, when the production premiered at Cal Performances in Berkeley. In an interview last year, Morris told me that in his staging of this pastoral opera (also referred to as a masque or *serenata*) he had imagined the singers and dancers "sharing the same world." It's a tricky proposition, this idea of having dancers and singers not only moving around the same space, but also interacting. Singers and dancers are different species, each with its own habitat and natural codes of behavior. By which I'm not implying that opera singers don't have theatrical presence, contrary to what many people believe. But a certain stillness becomes the singer and allows the audience to focus on the concentrated emotion and theatricality emanating from within the singer's body.

Morris is well aware of this, and, in fact, the most affecting moment in his *Acis* contains no dancing at all. After the eponymous shepherd—loved by the nymph



Sue-Yeon Youn performs in Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's *Rosas danst Rosas*. Photo: Stephanie Berger

Galatea—is killed by the jealous Cyclops Polyphemus, Galatea sings a mournful dirge. “Must I my Acis still bemoan, inglorious crush’d beneath that stone?” She [Yulia Van Doren] cries, standing alone on a darkened stage. The chorus responds from the orchestra pit, as if calling from the bowels of the earth: “cease, Galatea, cease to grieve!” This simple, purely vocal call-and-response needs no further visual enhancement, and Morris gives it none.

The finale, in which the dancers arrange themselves in a kaleidoscopic figure, joining hands and posing like marmoreal nymphs in a Baroque fountain, is heart-stopping as well. Here, the transubstantiation alluded to in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (the source of Händel’s story) is brought to life. “The bubbling fountain, lo! it flows!” Acis is frozen for eternity before our eyes. The beauty of the image is intensified by the deep, watery blue of Adrienne Lobel’s back curtain (in turn echoed by Isaac Mizrahi’s floating costumes). Lobel’s designs, a series of scrims awash in impressionistic dribbles and dabs of color, are drawn from her own paintings, created outdoors in the forests of upstate New York. They are a source of visual pleasure throughout the work, despite looking slightly dwarfed by the dimensions of the stage of the Koch

Theatre.

In fact, I got the distinct sense that the work would look and sound better in a smaller, more resonant house. The acoustics of the Koch are famously challenging—New York City Opera was always threatening to leave—and did no favors to the slender, chamber-sized voices of the two tenors (Thomas Cooley and Isaiah Bell). Even the orchestra, playing Mozart’s 1788 orchestration, sounded muffled. This was in marked contrast with the sound produced by the larger Bolshoi orchestra just a few weeks earlier.

In any case, the arrival of the final tableau of Morris’s *Acis* is one of those uplifting moments when all the elements come together to form an ecstatic whole: the music rising from the pit, the colors and geometries of the stage, the humanity of the performers. For a moment, all was right with the world. *Acis* is Morris’s homage to nature, as shaped by the genius of man.

The stillness of this image stands in vivid contrast to the final rush of his *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, also by Händel. In that work, dancers sweep across the stage, surging toward the audience in inexorable waves. *Acis* begins in a similar manner, with frolicking couples running and skipping hand and hand. Once the singers



Jakub Truszczyński and Johanne Saunier in a scene from Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s Bartók/*Mikrokosmos*. Photo: Stephanie Berger



Mark Morris Dance Group in the final tableau of Morris's *Acis and Galatea*. Photo: Richard Termine.

arrive, though, Morris must negotiate around them. He alternates various tactics, sometimes doubling the singers with dancers whose movements seem to echo—sometimes literally, often not—the sentiments expressed by libretto. At others, the dancers surround and engulf the singers, or, conversely, lead them from one point to another. Morris has created stylized gestures for the singers to execute as a complement to each aria, and as a result, with the exception of the relaxed and natural Yulia Van Doren, they never look comfortable in their own skins. (Isaac Mizrahi's costumes for them aren't particularly flattering either.) It's as if Morris hasn't trusted them to find their own way to be expressive, or to look poised while singing.

The exception to this slight awkwardness is the comic aria "O ruddier than the cherry," in which the Cyclops (Douglas Williams) carouses with a group of unwilling nymphs, grabbing intimate parts of their anatomy as they sidle past. It's Polyphemus as ambidextrous sexual predator (and also reminiscent of the salacious with in

his *Dido*). The fact that the baritone Douglas Williams, a frequent collaborator of Morris's, is tall and handsome as a *matinée* idol makes it all the funnier. Bawdiness is a Morris specialty, and Williams dives in with both hands and an ironic twinkle in his eye. (He gets his payback later, when a small circle of female nymphs pummels him at the rear of the stage.) There are other rollicking moments, like a lusty Irish folk dance that animates the rather tedious, repetitive tenor aria "Love Sounds th'alarm." Repetition is an unavoidable feature of Baroque opera, a fact that constantly threatens the work's momentum.

For all its pleasures, *Acis* doesn't have the revelatory effect of works like *L'Allegro*, *Dido*, and *Socrates*. It's hard to repeat such masterpieces. Perhaps the reason is as simple as a lack of affinity with the plot. Idealized, monogamous love has never been a favorite topic. Though the dancing is joyous and human, it doesn't always feel essential. It's not quite top-shelf Morris. But I'll take middle-shelf any day.