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A Stylistic Chameleon Stays in Camouflage

Benjamin Millepied — who emerged as one of the last dancers to work with Jerome Robbins and then came to fame as a strikingly assured, handsome principal with New York City Ballet — has been an enigmatic choreographer for years. What style of dancing does he like? What images of energy does he present? What ideas of humanity does he believe in? His ballets give no clear answers to those questions, though several of

The L.A. Dance Project in William Forsythe's "Quintett," part of a triple bill at Montclair State.

He is now artistic director of a new repertory company, the L.A. Dance Project. The result, as seen last week at **Montclair State University's Alexander Kasser Theater**, only deepens the Millepied mystery. The triple bill included one new work by Mr. Millepied himself, one extraordinary and dark 1964 piece by Merce Cunningham, and one 1993 semi-ballet by William Forsythe. The eclecticism is admirable. All three works look remarkably "now." The dancers tackle their diverse challenges with skill.

Yet my own reactions to two of the works take me from one extreme to another. Cunningham is one of the greatest choreographers of the last 50 years, and this particular reconstruction of his "Winterbranch" proves a sensational revelation of both his theatrical imagination and the designer Robert Rauschenberg's — it takes us places where even they never went. Meanwhile, Mr. Forsythe's work is hollow. He creates non-worlds in which all human behavior — not least ballet — looks labored and freakish. His "Quintett," shown here and long admired by many, is no exception.

Mr. Millepied's "Moving Parts," new in September, shows him working in a modishly urban ballet mode: no pointwork, lots of floorwork, with ballet virtuosity and fluency amalgamated with more grounded, labor-intensive idioms. Flat vertical boards, patterned with abstract designs, are wheeled to and fro by dancers, like changes of scenery. The image is that of the ever-altering modern city.

The music, by Nico Muhly, switches between friendly minimalism and other idioms; the organ part is a recording of Muhly, but there is also live playing from Hiedaki Aormori (clarinet) and Michi Wiancko (violin).

In a single phrase, a dancer will sweep a leg round in grand rond de jambe, descend to the floor and continue at speed. Two men, Morgan Lugo and Nathan Makolandra, have a prolonged duet that fleetingly hints at mutual regard but mainly displays calmly nonsexual cooperation.

A third man, Charlie Hodges, has a solo of fast, bouncing ballet jumps and turns, all set to brisk pizzicati from the violin. This is the work's brightest and finest passage; here we see Mr. Millepied really marrying a dancer's skills to music with happy sensitivity. Elsewhere the dance sequences, competently composed and staged, keeps recalling other people's work.

When Cunningham composed "Winterbranch," his ideas for movement were all about falling. But to Rauschenberg, who was preparing the décor, lighting and costumes, he said, "Think of night instead of day."

Rauschenberg had the idea of events picked out by the headlights of cars at night: he put the dancers into black, the women's hair loose, the faces daubed with black marks; he had beams of light traveling across the space (even into the auditorium), and other sources of dim light turning on and off; and in one sequence he provided a "monster," an apparatus assembled in each theater that was slowly taken across the stage.

The composer La Monte Young made a score that alternated between near silence and protracted, amplified scrapings or screeches. The drama that emerged was, for many people in the 1960s, Cunningham's most desolate, bleak and tragic.

The dances of "Winterbranch" have been revived a number of times, usually with some version of Rauschenberg's costumes and makeup. The movement does indeed feature falls, fast or extremely slow, supported or solo.

Certain motifs — a woman turning her torso and face, Sphinxlike, to the audience; a couple falling again and again to the floor to arrive in a rectangular pattern; a woman tracing a huge arc as, with arm raised, she slowly arches back to the floor with two men's support — keep being reiterated in various ways. While it has urgency and intensity, its structure is remarkably formal, ritualistic.

But Rauschenberg's original décor and lighting have not been seen in full since the 1970s. It's very exciting to discover how they change the action. The traveling beams of light suggest not only traffic but also searchlights; other effects evoke lightning or failing electricity. And so the dance seems fugitive, furtive, oppressed, but at other times resolute, unstoppable. And the music heightens the tension.

By contrast, the five dancers of Mr. Forsythe's plotless "Quintett" seem always to be proclaiming "Moi," whether they are holding a sculptural ballet position, pretending to be clumsy or playful about laying hands on one another, or fluently tossing off a few dance phrases. Mr. Forsythe loves to choreograph hints of the consummate ballet maker he might be if only he chose.

Instead, however, he plays theater games with us. Dancing matters less than the alienating lighting or the artful social behavior with which dancers project mood or personality. Mr. Forsythe makes ballet virtuosity look showily bizarre; the performers start to appear freakish. It was a shock in Thursday's performance to see Mr. Hodges, in

spectacles, become one-dimensional as he played the overeager little buffoon; Mr. Millepied's choreography, by contrast, had made the same dancer look rounded, alert, brilliant.

As a consequence, this L.A. Dance Project doesn't cohere aesthetically as yet. Mr. Millepied is such a stylistic chameleon that it will be curious to see where he goes next. It seems evident that he is gifted, ambitious, intelligent. But his gifts so far have looked nebulous and self-contradictory, like this opening program of his company.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 9, 2012

A dance review on Oct. 30 about a program by L. A. Dance Project at Montclair State University that included "Winterbranch" by Merce Cunningham misstated a remark Cunningham made to Robert Rauschenberg, who prepared the décor, lighting and costumes for the original production. He said, "Think of night instead of day," not "Think of the night as if it were day."

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