



Rites of Passage

Acknowledging a mentor and questioning a tradition

by Deborah Jowitt

March 29th, 2007 12:33 PM

A choreographic tribute to a beloved teacher? You might not rush out to buy tickets. But Zvi Gotheiner memorializes his mentor, Gertrud Kraus (1901-1977), in such charming and ingenious ways that sentimentality never raises its head. Sentimentality, in any case, wouldn't suit this tiny, vigorous pioneer of modern dance in Israel. A major dancer-choreographer in Vienna, an avowed leftist and a Jew, Kraus was prescient enough to emigrate in 1935, two years after Hitler's Nazi party came to power in Germany.

Gotheiner knew Kraus as a tough but encouraging mentor who—cigarette in one hand, cup of coffee nearby—taught classes and dispensed advice and feedback to aspiring choreographers. She'd stopped working in the theater in the 1950s and turned to painting and sculpture, but said, "In fact, I never stopped choreographing. Only I did not go on staging my dances with live dancers."

It is not only Kraus's ingenious methods for generating movement that inform Gotheiner's *Gertrud* (the last event of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Festival), but the shapes and lines in her artwork, projected behind the dancers. Various of Gotheiner's 12 expert performers assume Kraus's role without impersonating her (except for a beguiling few moments when small Kuan Hui Chew walks stiffly around, hunched and puffing on an invisible cigarette while she gives terse comments to attentive young people). Lessons function importantly in the structure of *Gertrud*. As it begins, Jae Man Joo is giving instructions to Rommel Salveron according to some Krausian system of movement, like "Face 9 o'clock." Bring your right elbow to 3 o'clock." Salveron follows obediently. Letters of the alphabet further mold the steps in subsequent "lessons" (Elisa King guiding Todd Allen, then Barbara Koch—a much tougher teacher—taking over). At one point, Allen-as-Kraus throws out a handful of matches and squats to ponder them, as if devising patterns based on the chance design. In the vigorous dance he puts the others through, they chant not just the counts, but voice the lively foot rhythms with another mnemonic device: "paprika, goulash, schnitzel, noodle. . ."

Rabiah Troncelliti's costumes—monochromatic trunks and tee-shirts—look contemporary but allude to the gymnastic aspect of German *ausdrucktanz*. Mark London's expert lighting helps immeasurably to foster an atmosphere of drama and theatricality. Scott Killian's score buoys dance passages ranging from exploratory to robust, as when the performers grasp one another's shoulders, form a chain, and pound out brief folk dances. And he sensitively allows silence or quiet to take over during

passages of speaking (when Kyle Lang talks of the nature of art or Ying-Ying Shau dances furiously while delivering all possible terms involving the word "point").

Process is embedded in the finished performance and not just when a Gertrud substitute is giving orders. When Jimmy Everett slides his well-oiled joints into complex, coiling and uncoiling motion, we sense that he's "reading" Kraus's drawings (later, during a duet with Jocelyn Tobias, they call out possible interpretations of the slides as they dance: "I see an airplane." "I see a dog.") When Koch repeats solo material several times, we imagine her rehearsing it. When Joo jabbars silently to his own agile fingers and pokes them into his open mouth, we imagine a choreographic study on a given theme.

At the very end, the only existing footage of Kraus is screened—all 17 seconds of it. She's doing a voodoo dance in a production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, utterly possessed by the contortions of her limbs.

Kraus didn't teach her students to imitate her but showed them how to find their own styles. The very way in which Gotheiner honors her reveals the gift she gave him.

Igor Stravinsky's magisterial choral work, *Les Noces*, has been tackled by many choreographers since Diaghilev's Ballets Russes premiered Bronislava Nijinska's great 1923 ballet. In shaping his 2006 *Noces*, Gotheiner took a risk that resulted in some powerful dancing and a message very different from Nijinska's harsh and stoic depiction of an arranged marriage in Russian peasant tradition. In abandoning Stravinsky's words and narrative thrust, however, he risked making the piece—with its repetitions and variations of similar material—seem long. It does feel long, but its rich dancing and resonant, beautifully chosen images sweep you through to the end.

Gotheiner's ritual seems timeless, although his message—that marriage may not be limited to a man and a woman—is thoroughly contemporary. The men wear black pants and white tee-shirts; Troncelliti costumes the women in short, full, black-and-white print dresses trimmed with red. Like moments caught by a camera, aspects of a wedding ritual surface from the dancing. We glimpse many possible brides and grooms. Alison Clancy sits on one of four long black benches beside Salveron, and others cluster to fix her hair. Not long after that, Tobias is groomed for Lang. Twice, a woman flees from a waiting man. The ten dancers constantly rearrange the benches so that two "families" can confront each other—this person rising with a gesture, that one facing him down—until a push-pull squabble develops.

But whatever the mood of the small vignettes, the gestures, the rituals, and the rushing around, the dancing is always lusty; the strong foot rhythms that Stravinsky's music calls out for pull the dancers into celebratory lines and circles. These days it's rare to see dancing and drama mate without one of them overwhelming the other.

The happy flouting of traditional gender roles doesn't happen until near the end. One by one, people seated on a bench are chosen by partners and drawn to their feet by a kiss. It's a lovely idea. And that's when you notice two women joined here, two men there. In the final moments, Shau and Everett (female and male) are prominent—walking together along the benches, with their friends hastening to bring new ones so that the pair never touch the floor. But all cluster on and under the pathway as Stravinsky's last, final chimes resound—a bouquet of lovers as variegated as field flowers.