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ADF: Dances of conflict and unity

By Orla Swift, Staff Writer
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DURHAM - With little movement, no costumes, and almost no sound, Eiko & Koma speak volumes in "Rust," the jarring opener to Monday's triple bill at American Dance Festival.

ZviDance's reinterpretation of "Les Noces," Stravinsky's dance cantata about a Russian peasant wedding, also has a fresh, contemporary urgency.

Sandwiched between the two, John Jasperse's "Pure," a world premiere commissioned by American Dance Festival, seems trivial and incoherent.

"Rust," commissioned for ADF in 1989, demonstrates the Japanese choreographers' so-called "delicious movement," striking tableaux that change almost imperceptibly as minutes tick by.

Naked and ghostlike in white powder makeup, the two spend much of the dance awkwardly upside down and bound to a towering chicken wire fence as if stuck to flypaper.

They each move only a few feet by dance's end. But their shared and yet largely solitary struggles say much about the anonymity of global suffering, about codependency, war, prison, sluggish or failed political reforms and any number of self-inflicted emotional hardships.

David Ferri's subtle lighting design seems at once to reveal and obscure the dancers' plights, providing a telling theme in itself. And the pair's occasional gazes out at the audience serve as indelible reminders of our own complicity in others' pain.

ZviDance maintains some of those themes with "Les Noces," a remarkable marriage of movement to a rhythmically and melodically difficult score.

Choreographer Zvi Gotheiner's choreography -- which he credits also to his dancers -- melds a traditional Eastern European folk dance vocabulary with aggressive contemporary movements such as pelvic thrusts, lip-locks and limb-tugging brawls.

The dance seems to convey a love story of sorts, though with multiple and changing couples. The dancers move as if on fire with a chaotic passion and aggression.

Gotheiner incorporates wooden benches in various configurations, whipped around the floor by the dancers, who themselves sometimes fly off while moving them, as if thrown by centrifugal force. The morphing borders created by the benches, as well as the dancers' seemingly suicidal jumps off them, infuse the dance with a more wide-reaching theme about alliances and disputes between communities and nations. The precarious final image works especially well with that theme.

Gotheiner's training as a violinist is evident in his attention to the music's undercurrents and its recurring themes. Even Rabiah Troncelliti's costumes seem to suggest sections of instruments, which look uniform but can sound completely unrelated. Those who come to dance through a love of music will surely bless this fiery marriage.

Jasperse's "Pure" lacks the cohesion of its program-mates, coming across more as a work-in-progress than a fit-for-prime-time premiere.

Using a pop and rock score ranging from George and Ira Gershwin to Springsteen, Jasperse -- who also credits the performers as co-creators -- presents a variety of scenes that deal somewhat with notions of truth and deception. Sometimes it's mesmerizing, as with a dance set to Neil Young's "Ohio," which explores camouflage and self-conscious public presentation. Sometimes it's funny, as with Jasperse's confessional attempts to master a spin.

But by show's end, this hodgepodge fails to cohere into even a mildly interesting memory. Sandwiched between the other two riveting works, it's all the more dissatisfying.