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Les Noces and 12A

ZVIDANCE

Dance Theater Workshop, New York City

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by Tom Philips

ZVIDANCE stands out among today's modern dance groups, both for the strength of its ensemble dancing — not a weak link in these eleven — and the power and sense of its choreography, by artistic director Zvi Gotheiner, in collaboration with the dancers. After a slightly muddled and over-ambitious effort called "Territories" last year, Gotheiner and company are back on track with a pair of clearly conceived, fiercely danced premieres. First and foremost was an incisive dance called "12A," a reference to fear of the number 13. If you anticipate an essay on superstition, you get more than you bargained for: this little piece of dance, drama, and song is rather an essay on human nature, and the contortions and convulsions we put ourselves through to ward off the irrationality of existence.

Some of it is funny, such as Elisa King weaving crazily across the floor to keep from stepping on a crack, or Jimmy Everett flailing his limbs and crashing onto the floor, to the sound of his own voice doing a Seinfeld-like putdown of self-pity. Some of it is painful, as in Barbara Koch standing on half-pointe for about five minutes, until her skirt shakes from the effort. Some is deliberately banal, like repeated ritual blessings, or exhortations to "have a nice day." Some of it is beautiful, as in the slow, distorted solo ballet by Jae Man Joo that ends the piece. And some is just chillingly human, most of all a set piece by the most arresting presence in the company, the steely Ying-Ying Shiau. She steps forward near the end to tell a story about the nonsense her mother once employed to ward off the anger of some tree spirits, played by her fellow dancers making twisted, funny faces. Her parents don't really believe in this stuff, she tells us, but they would "rather believe it's true than not believe anything at all."

All these foibles are played out on a bare stage with a flattened circle of light in the background, and accompanied by cycles of murmuring sound constructed by Gotheiner's

long-time musical collaborator, Scott Killian. The total effect is of humanity in its contemporary setting, with all its traditional nonsense arrayed against an ever-circling, unchanging fate.

The second premiere was Gotheiner's new choreography to Stravinsky's wedding suite, "Les Noces." The program note says he intends to discover what the ancient institution of marriage might mean to 21st century Americans, in the "post-Stonewall" era. The elements are four men, six women and four piano benches, which are pushed and hauled around the stage to become pews, obstacles, bridges, tunnels, opposing dugouts, loveseats, and in the end, four-poster beds. As you might guess, the couples who wind up kissing and getting hitched are not all traditional: three out of five are same-sex pairings. But the other elements of marriage are deeply traditional. No couple is ever alone in this piece; they make and shift their attachments in the midst of the pressures and urgings of the ensemble. This is marriage as the basis of community, celebrated with folk-dance turns for the men, then the women, then the whole group. The movement matches the elemental kick of the Stravinsky score — order and discord held together by timeless ritual. This is indeed a "Les Noces" for the 21st century, an affirmation of marriage and commitment in terms that were once unthinkable. Gotheiner approaches it fearlessly, and masters it in movement that reflects all the conflict and complication that the institution can absorb.

Coming out of Israel to America, Gotheiner is one of the few choreographers today who can express the interpenetration of ancient and contemporary culture. Along with this he has mastered a unique style — with elements of ballet, modern dance, folk dance, meditation and combat — and assembled a close-knit company of superb dancer-collaborators. All this, along with the essential humanity of his enterprise, make him in my opinion a major artist, one to whom serious attention is overdue.

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