



Dance

## Communities Centered

In the Middle of the Road to Heaven, Maybe

by Deborah Jowitz

December 27 - January 2, 2001

Risa Jaroslow choreographs as if the most important thing in the world were how and why someone takes another's hand or leans into another's embrace, as if her mission were to explore the common needs and visions that bring people together. *Table Talk*—one of two new Jaroslow works presented by the Danspace Project a couple of weeks ago—offers a stripped-down vision of community, performed by four diverse young dancers (Jessica Ames, Eun Jung Gonzalez, Rashaun Mitchell, and Francisco Rider Da Silva), Jaroslow herself, and Gus Solomons jr., a cool-dude, slightly sardonic, avuncular presence. In it, Jaroslow expresses social urges through variations on a single activity. To music written and performed by Bruce Mack, these people group and regroup around three tables, one topped with grass and one featuring a vase of roses hanging upside down underneath it (the set's by Perry Gunther).

As I watch the dancers slip around, squeeze into an already occupied chair, or regard the goings-on at another table, I imagine relationships: Parents watch grown children romp; Solomons and Gonzalez have what might be a family squabble over possession of a table. Their desires are real, but their acts transcend naturalism. At the end of the quarrel, Jaroslow comes over and folds Solomons's tall body into a compact package. As the two of them sit at a table, she puts her chin on his lifted hand and presses it down. The piece is like a warm-hued sketch in which nothing much develops; somewhat like life, it keeps making little variations on basic scenarios.

*Home/Wire Walking*, rawer and more raucous, grew out of a workshop Jaroslow gave for the women of University Settlement's Project Home. Ames, Gonzalez, Heidi Selz, and Toni Melaas join women from the project (Yim Chin, Florence Choice, and Valerie Spencer) in telling stories (their own and those of others), chanting, and forming zesty, stamping-clapping-slapping choruses to back up singers Nancy Alfaro and Novella Nelson—the former jittery and rushing about in high heels, belting out that she spreads herself too thin; the latter majestic and deep-voiced in African robes. Ellen Maddow's lively music for cello, saxophone, flute, and percussion underscores the sense of the words. A whistle keeps summoning the women to one more day of waiting for an interview, waiting for an apartment—hell-bent to get off welfare, get a home, get a real job.

This is less a dance than a piece of funky, socially pugnacious musical theater, in which statistics and case studies reinforce the fierce drive and solidarity that the performers project. "You'll never see *her* up shit creek," sings Nelson. Uh-uh!

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In the middle of the road of life, I have frequently found myself in a dark wood, but never expected to sit blindfolded in St. Mark's Church while performers rush about moaning, squeaking like bats, and letting us feel the chill wind of their passage. Actually, those first few moments of Rosa Mei's *Divine Comedy* most successfully evoke the pity and terror that Dante expressed in his great work. Mei doesn't convey the fearsome journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven very profoundly, but she does get a chutzpah award for trying to reduce Dante's cantos to a 75-minute dance with a cast of six.

Actor David Dixon stumps about intermittently on short, thick stilts, speaking for Dante and for spirits he encounters. It is Dixon who intones, "All hope abandon ye who enter here," he who tells the tale of Pasiphaë's lust for the bull. A doomed soul, he also greedily begs a volunteer to satisfy his

compulsion—"I must pull hair"—and offers in return to let himself be punched in the gut. Sodom and Gomorrah!

What Mei excels at is boldly designed, strongly presented movement influenced by martial arts. Whether kinky or exultant, the dancing often takes the form of combat. The excellent performers (Anne-Marie Brulé, Esteban Cárdenas, Galois Cohen, Izumi Fujii, and Saeko Miyake) counter slo-mo passages by winding fiercely into two-dimensional poses and freezing there. Some of Mei's images are memorable (as are the oddly textured and layered costumes by Reiko Kawashima). The music, created and performed by Jacob Robinette and Rick Ochoa with a variety of instruments and electronic tamperings, is wilder and eerier than anything we see. While Dante's "Beatrice" (Cohen) molds herself into seductive poses, Robinette vocalizes in a countertenor; at another point he dogs Miyake, rubbing his wet finger around the rim of a glass bowl.

It's difficult for the dance to build power or convey an ascent from the depths, especially since the performers arise from child-size red chairs to perform, and sit back down when finished.

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For David Dorfman's *To Lie Tenderly*, shown earlier in December, designer Paul Clay creates against the BAM Harvey's crumbling back wall what resembles a fenced playground from the city of the future, with a video screen revolving on high like some kind of sensor. Distorted images of the dancers' faces slide around the white fabric barriers. Amy Denio's intermittent score for guitar, accordion, sax, electric violin, drums, and voice (performed live) crackles and sighs and batters at the place. For *Subverse*, red fabric columns descend, and lighting designer Jane Cox projects cane-weave patterns on the rear wall and floor. High up at the back, composer-violinist Hahn Rowe presides like a magician over his drum'n'bass score.

Dorfman and his wonderful performers (Jeanine Durning, Curt Haworth, Paul Matteson, Jennifer Nugent, Lisa Race, and Tom Thayer), wearing soft clothes by Naoko Nagata, play themselves as members of a small dance community. They are also characters in a world-size drama who charge around and tumble together and get passionate about a single sentence. I love the warmth and shagginess of Dorfman's dances, although they sometimes sprawl (*To Lie Tenderly* extends, dangerously, past a fine natural ending). Do the performers lie? "This dance is about never knowing who you are," announces one of them. Later it's "This dance is about holding hands," and, to prove it, they do. Matteson woos the audience fulsomely, "You're for me!" "Caw!" they all cry, "Caw!" as if to warn of trickery. The superb Durning, small and wiry, holds Nugent as if she were a large baby and is bent backward beneath the weight. People's feet go out from under them. Their world is one in which the very ground may undercut you, to say nothing of your friends, whose embraces can rough you up like a lion's tongue.

Dorfman opens *Subverse* on a little rectangle of fake grass by telling a joke that also calls fixed meanings into question, and his movement is as duplicitous as it is grounded. Here's this pretty hefty guy, whose limbs dart and slide and whirl fluidly about him. The dry-ice effect isn't the only smoke screen. People flail and fall unexpectedly. They splinter their volatile dancing into counterpoint, and it transforms. Watching Durning dance, Matteson laughs and laughs. Dorfman voyages through this excitable country he has created and, at the end, dodges forward under the descending curtain to sleep on his little grass mat.