Rosas tests Dance Festival

DURHAM — The American Dance Festival offers performances that easily draw in audiences, as well as others that purposely challenge and provoke, such as those this weekend by Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s company, Rosas. The company’s belated debut at the festival confirms that her work still tests an audience’s expectations and endurance while stimulating those receptive to its rewards.

De Keersmaeker chose to showcase her 1983 work, “Rosas Danst Rosas,” a seminal piece that established her exploration of minimalism and natural gesture. The 100-minute work still seems new in its starkness and repetitive movements.

On a shadowy, bare stage, four women in loose rehearsal togs file in and fall suddenly to the floor. They proceed to writhe slowly and attempt wearily to stand but repeatedly drop back down. Their grunts and exhalations the only sounds, they perform with incredible precision in mirrored stretching and rolling, until one breaks away and then another. The movements are limited and seem to be the same, but soon are minor variations and combinations emerge.

After 20 minutes of silent interplay reflecting individuality versus conformity, the dancers drop their severe characters and casually arranging wooden chairs. A blast of rhythmic music starts the second section, the seated dancers repeating a set of forceful gestures, such as running hands through their hair and jerking their heads, varying them little by little in entropic layers.

The piece makes a major shift twice more, first with the dancers moving in a jazzier, more sensual mode, then in freer, swirling patterns that utilize the whole stage. Throughout, the music by Thierry De Mey and Peter Vermeersch matches the repetitive, slightly varying movements, as does Remon Fromont’s ever-evolving lighting.

The piece forces the audience to drop any anticipation of easy entertainment and makes it concentrate on detecting minute changes and the mesmerizing effect of repetition.