



JULY 11, 2011

By: Kate Dobbs Ariail

Oh! The Humanity - Doug Varone and Dancers Show the Stories at ADF

Doug Varone's concerns as a dancemaker are humanistic and kinetic, and sometimes literary. The three appear in gracious balance in his 2010 work, *Chapters from a Broken Novel*, the 20 dances of which are being performed together in Reynolds Theater in an evening-length piece as the 2011 American Dance Festival [www.americandancefestival.org] enters its penultimate week. The 20 scenes are each based on a quote — from a written or filmic source, or from overheard conversation—but are presented somewhat cinematically, with supertitles announcing the new chapter after the scenes have cross-faded. Removing the gap between scenes makes this dance a page-turner.

So does the fact that *Chapters* concerns people and their feelings—a wide swath of the range of emotional experience common among humanity. These dancers do not appear as sightless automatons, wound up and set into mechanical motion, but as live souls, connecting with their eyes and bodies. Thus, in contrast to those ciphers on Emanuel Gat's stage last week, we care for these dancers; they make us feel, and we recognize those feelings because we share them.

Varone is not unduly concerned with being hyper-original — his vocabulary and staging do not require the viewer to struggle in bafflement or stretch the mind around improbable or self-indulgent concepts. His work is nice. In the sad, parlous state of critical thinking, that might easily be meant and taken as an insult. I mean it as a positive observation. Nice, as opposed to arid, arrogant, cynical or satiric. Nice, as opposed to ugly. Nice, as in honey draws more flies than vinegar. Nice, as in the work cozies up to you and gets you to let down your guard and admit to all your sad failings and small glories. Nice, as in, you get to be happy while watching the dance.

Chapters is greatly aided in its niceness by a very enjoyable, lively, musical score by David Van Tieghem. The score includes a certain amount of scratchy noise and collected sound and conversation, but it is mostly music, textured and rhythm-driven. This is another aspect of the performance standing in high contrast to Gat's work last week. Here the dancers are dancing with music that is music, and it is such a pleasure to see. In fact, seeing *Chapters* is very easy (where seeing *Brilliant Corners* was difficult) because the lighting is extremely good. Jane Cox has designed an unusual combination that gives soft overall illumination along with bright emphasis from foot- and side-lights. Dramatic chiaroscuro is still possible, and is used well with the action, but mostly we don't have to fight the shadows to get a glimpse of the dancers' faces. And never for one moment do the lights glare into the audience's eyes. Working in Andrew Lieberman's set design, Cox makes inventive use of a huge overhead curtain of parachute material to further soften light, and as a screen for catching shadow images, as well as a display for the supertitles. The dance of the light is nearly as compelling as the bodies in motion.

I found all the chapters of *Chapters* fascinating in their different ways. Some are brief — hardly more than an

instant — but long enough to make their points, which are often humorous, as in “Target Practice,” in which a dancer (Hollis Bartlett) leaps from spot to spot, trying to find his light, that evasive spotlight. Others are longer and the humor twists a little, as in “Tile Riot,” where Erin Owen tries on different personalities in the bathroom mirror (extra-special lighting effects here). Netta Yerushalmy flashing through the hilariously rapid “Twelve Dreams for Rent” is a knock-out. She also nails some darker roles in chapters would be full, complex dances on their own. I was particularly affected by “Glass” and “Ruby Throated Sparrows,” in which she partners with Colin Stilwell in deeply-felt pieces based, respectively, on an Alice Munro quote and one from Crosby, Stills and Nash.

Perhaps the loveliest dance in the suite is “The Ghosts of Insects,” danced by Bartlett, Owen, Yeurshalmy and the excellent Eddie Taketa. It is inspired by a quote from scientist Lewis Thomas, in *The Lives of a Cell*: “Filigrees of light through the gauzy curtains swept across them in stately silence like the translucent ghosts of insects. They stir, lie for a moment, then gather their bearings.” By the end of *Chapters from a Broken Novel*, one feels not the brokenness of the world, but as if one has gotten one’s bearings amidst the pieces of life, and that all directions point toward home.