

Swan Lake Samba Girl

Tonya's dance blog, where she muses about Ballet, Ballroom, and the trials and tribulations of being a skinny white girl learning Latin...

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GO SEE RIOULT!

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(photo of *Views of the Fleeting World* by Basil Childers)

Over the past week, Rioult (formerly called Pascal Rioult Dance Theater) has become one of my favorite modern dance companies. Artistic director and choreographer Pascal Rioult's work is like a visual opera, or an opera told all in dance (since opera is already visual). It's so breathtaking. And his movement style is like a combination of Balanchine and Martha Graham (he danced with Martha Graham's company). His dances are very expressionistic and full of drama and intensity and his dancers, most of whom are excellent movers, know how to convey that drama by dancing with a real sense of urgency and specificity of purpose. Every movement they make, there seems to be a specific thought behind it. If only all dancers would dance like this...

I saw four pieces over the past week at the Joyce (Chelsea): the world premiere of *The Great Mass*, set to Mozart's *Great Mass in C Minor*; and three of Rioult's classics: *Views of the Fleeting World*, *Les Noces*, and *Wien*. I loved all of them.

The Great Mass, Rioult's only full-length evening work, is dedicated to Marguerite Rioult, Rioult's mother, who passed away this year. She was a musician — a piano teacher and choir director, and a lover of Mozart. It's so much harder to describe works that you really like than works that you don't, particularly when they're abstract, but suffice it to say this was really beautiful, and, again, very operatic. I don't know much about Mozart unfortunately, but the music is choral, and known as his greatest, and the dance included all sections of the music: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Hosanna. Through much of it dancers wore richly embroidered white bodices with white tulle skirts and danced as if taken by the spirit, in passionate praise and glory.

But my favorite part was the darkest, a middle section from Gloria in which the dancers wore skin-toned leotards and appeared to be either spirits in hell reaching desperately upward toward a light shining brightly from above, or else humans still on earth praying desperately for salvation. They looked almost animalistic, serpentine, as they writhed around on the ground, then crawled about each other, trying to lift themselves upward toward the light. In the following section, three of my favorite dancers in the troupe — Robert Robinson (who looks like a smaller version of Clifton Brown), Jane Sato and Marianna Tsartolia — danced a pas de trois, each woman wrapping her arms and legs snake-like around Robinson, as if they were by turns trying to tempt him and hold onto him for dear life, as if he'd lead the way to salvation. Tsartolia had a more tormented look on her face, and seemed more desperate, while Sato gave her movement a more tempting and seductive feel. Robinson looked like he was trying to retain inner strength. That's what I loved about these dancers — everyone was so specific in their movement and intent, like they were always playing character.

The second program began with *Views of the Fleeting World* (pictured above), a long piece set to Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, that consisted of many different sections: Orchard (shown above, with the dancers in the gorgeous red skirts), Gathering Storm, Wild Horses, Dusk, Sudden Rain, Night Ride, Summer Wind, Moonlight, and Flowing River. Each section had a different theme and mood and each was accompanied by a different background impressionistic painting. My favorite section was Moonlight, when the magnificent Penelope Gonzalez danced a very sexy, almost entirely floor-bound duet with Brian Flynn. When I was reading up on the company, I read a lot about Gonzalez, and I see why so many critics love her. She is a tiny powerhouse, one of the most remarkable movers I've ever seen.



(Penelope Gonzalez, center, in *Wien*, photo by Basil Childers)

My friend Mika and I were mesmerized by the way they snaked their limbs in, out, over and around each other's bodies, sometimes a flexed foot, sometimes a pointed toe, how they lifted themselves up from the ground, upper body, then lower body, touching the floor at times only with one small part of their back (talk about a work-out!), how they'd dramatically arch their backs, how she'd slowly climb onto him, he'd lift her with his arms, on his back (that's hard work too). I was so blown away; this is one of the most brilliantly choreographed, mesmerizingly, tantalizing, beautiful "sex scenes" I've ever seen in dance.

Then was *Les Noces*, Mika's favorite of the night. It's set, just like Jerome Robbins' ballet of the same name, to Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, and, like Robbins', depicts the marriage rite of passage. Whereas Robbins' depicted a Russian peasant wedding set about a century ago, Rioult's is contemporary, and the curtain opens on four women dressed in bras and underwear dancing intensely atop a set of four chairs, kind of Mein Herr-like, the emotion they convey by turns fearful and seductive. After they dance, they help each other into a pair of bloomers and a corset-like waistband. The lights then dim on them and turn to a set of four men, dressed only in underwear, who dance atop four chairs of their own, the emotion similar but more masculine, more angry (perhaps some don't want to get married, feel like they're being pressured) At the end of their dance, then don black, tuxedo-like pants. The two groups then turn chairs toward each other, break into four separate male / female pairs, and each pair really goes at each other, an intense battle of the sexes. The consummation scene begins, as in Robbins', fraught with fear and trepidation and is rather horrifying, but eventually softens and grows sensual. The couples have overcome the storm.

And the evening ended with *Wien* (Vienna), set to Maurice Ravel's *La Valse* (which was originally titled *Wien*), which has become one of my favorite pieces of music, the same that Balanchine used for his *La Valse*. Rioult's version carries the same dark themes as Balanchine's — beauty turned bad, encroaching tragedy, social refinement embodied in the Viennese Waltz disintegrating in the face of human violence and destruction. But here, a small group of several huddle around each other, walking to the waltz in small steps, one right after the other, almost mechanically, or Charlie Chaplin-like. There is something inhuman and distorted about their movement, their need to huddle in a group, and follow the others. As the music swells, they move faster, but they're moving so quickly, and in circles, that they can't retain their balance. One in the group will try to reach up to the sky, only to go crashing to the floor. The others, far from helping the fallen one up, simply walk over him or her, making an effort not to trip, but to keep their steps — it's like they're in a militaristic march and they can't step out of line. At points they waltz with each other — men with women, women with women and men with men — but it's a very grotesque kind of waltzing. The women often look like rag dolls, dead; the men viciously throw them about. The movement is very different from Balanchine's, but the piece has that same intensely haunting, world-gone-mad quality.

I strongly recommend this company! They're at the Joyce through the 19th.
