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DANCE

# Finding New Steps in Ravel's Dance of Seduction

By GIA KOURLAS

SOMETIMES the dancer Joyce Herring cannot stop herself from rolling her eyes, however discreetly, when she hears of yet another choreographic scheme by her husband, Pascal Rioult.

The latest was his idea to create a piece for his company, Pascal Rioult Dance Theater, to Maurice Ravel's most famous work, "Bolero." It was his solution to a quandary: how to close "The Ravel Project," a program of four dances set to the music of Ravel that will open on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan.

"He said, 'I'm going to do "Bolero," and it's going to be about a machine,' and I thought, 'Oh, God, this is not going to work,'" Ms. Herring recalled with a groan. "And then he did it. Pascal just seems to have a key to Ravel's music. When he does what he does with it, you realize: 'Oh, yes! That's right! It's what it's supposed to be.'"

In truth, even Mr. Rioult had a few doubts about setting a dance to the overused "Bolero." (He said that his decision had nothing to do with the 1979 film "10," in which "Bolero" famously plays in the background of a seduction scene. He has never even seen the movie.) But after listening to the music repeatedly, Mr. Rioult was able to create a dance mirroring the repetitiveness of "Bolero." And it is no great coincidence that in Ravel's music, Mr. Rioult, who like the composer is French, has found a source of choreographic enlightenment.

His affection for Ravel is in keeping with Mr. Rioult's traditionalism. He creates dances from entirely musical inspirations, an approach to movement practically unheard of in contemporary dance. Mr. Rioult may lose "cool" points — his romantic style resembles Paul Taylor's lyricism more than Merce Cunningham's technique of choreographing to silence, then adding the score. He may attempt challenging pieces like "Bolero," but he knows he is not fashionable.

"Believe me, I struggle with it," Mr. Rioult, 47, said after a recent rehearsal. "But somebody once said, 'Follow your bliss.' This is my bliss, this is my truth and my instinct. I can't do something because it's cool or even because it would be neat to try something different. It would be wrong. Instinct dictates your duty as an artist. Intellect can be used to avoid getting to that point."

Such an instinct may be what leads his wife to roll her eyes from time to time. She reacted similarly after Mr. Rioult told her he planned to set another dance, "Home Front," to Ravel's "Tombeau de Couperin" and said that it was going to be about women staying at home and missing their men at war. But again, to her disbelief, when the piece had its premiere in 2000, it worked.

The Ravel program, first presented at the University of California at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall in February, includes "Home Front" and the tumultuous "Wien," a 1995 work set to "La Valse." The other two dances are New York premieres: the dramatic triptych "Prelude to Night," which stars Ms. Herring and is set to three short compositions ("Prélude à la Nuit," "Alborada del Gracioso" and "Pavane for a Dead Princess") and "Bolero," a galvanizing dance for eight.

For Robert Cole, who, as director of Cal Performances, was a commissioner of "The Ravel Project," Mr. Rioult possesses an original choreographic voice. That is all the more remarkable considering that Mr. Rioult performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company for nine years. As many veterans of the Graham Company have demonstrated, it is no easy task to break away from such a powerful mentor and forge a unique style.

"His vocabulary has roots both in American mod-



**Following his bliss, Pascal Rioult discovers choreographic inspiration in the sensual but not necessarily fashionable cadences of 'Bolero.'**

ern dance and in the European tradition, which is rare," Mr. Cole said. "He also has a keen sense of expressing music and movement. I think he is both an artist and a craftsman, which is what every great choreographer has to be."

It is true that even though Mr. Rioult's company includes Ms. Herring and Linda Hodes — two other former members of Graham's company — as associate artistic director and rehearsal director, respectively, his work little resembles that of the modern dance pioneer. Always sophisticated, yet alternately romantic as in "Wien" or sleek and mechanical as in "Bolero," Mr. Rioult's work is consistently striking. But conquering "Bolero" was hardly easy.

"You think you know the music, but you don't until you really listen to it," he said. "Usually I have no problem with images coming to me, but when I started to listen to it at first, I was blank. There was nothing, and it was scary as hell."

Finally he decided the answer would be to mirror the redundancy of the music by creating a factory of bodies that repeated and inverted four angular move-

## Pascal Rioult Dance Theater

Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue.

Tuesday, 7:30; Wednesday-Friday, 8; Saturday, 2 and 8

ment phrases throughout the piece.

"There's so much repetition in the music, with a slight variation, so the trick was how to build up to the crescendo," Mr. Rioult said. "Ravel doesn't change anything. He brings color in by introducing new instruments so it becomes richer and richer. He has 70 or 80 instruments, and I only have eight dancers, but I decided to put them all onstage at once. You get the sense that there are more people onstage than there actually are."

In the piece, dancers stand stationary, their elbows bent rigidly as if they are embarking upon a machine-like classroom exercise. As it progresses, one dancer and then another breaks away from the pack to perform a simple solo, in which Mr. Rioult taps into the sensuality of the music. But such passages are brief. Just as quickly, the dancers resume their places within the group.

"In a sense, my lifesaver was Ravel himself," Mr. Rioult said. "I listened closely to the music and had the concept to build a minimal vocabulary with many repetitions. It's a very different piece for me, which is good, but I see myself as still a young choreographer. Studying Ravel made me realize that I am still learning my craft. Strangely, after imposing formal restrictions, I feel freer."

As for his affinity for Ravel, which Ms. Herring deemed "spooky," Mr. Rioult sees a similar way of working. "I feel that Ravel really takes you on an



Photographs by Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

**Pascal Rioult, left, and members of his company at a Midtown Manhattan dance studio rehearsing "Bolero," one of a program of four dances he has set to Ravel's music.**

adventure," he said. "But at the end of the journey, there's a sense of, 'Yes, of course.' And that's something I've always tried to do in my work — to surprise people, but by the end, to take them to a place that makes sense."

He concedes that it could also have something to do with personality. "Ravel was a wild man inside, but not on the outside," Mr. Rioult said. "He was very shy, a hard worker and painstaking. He was called, by some, the Swiss clockmaker because he was so incredibly meticulous. Finally I'm comfortable enough to admit that if it's my way, it's my way. Some people like my work and others don't." He smiled. "It might not be good to be a Swiss clockmaker, but that's my way, too, and I have to stay my course with great determination." □