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DANCE

THIS WEEK

Voguing to Sounds of Bartok

KAROLE ARMITAGE watched from the sidelines of a studio in Midtown Manhattan as 12 dancers leaped like birds frightened by a sudden storm. They were joined onstage by three male voguers, their limbs moving in fluid, mesmerizing contortions to the eerie, percussive score by Bartok. Then the dancer Sharmila Desai began a series of slow-motion backbends and headstands, alternating them with yogalike meditations.

Such is the world of Ms. Armitage's choreography, a mélange of styles — ballet and modern, popular and Eastern — that she weaves together seamlessly. Her stunning new work, "Time Is the Echo of an Axe Within a Wood," which takes its title from a line in a poem by Philip Larkin, will have its premiere at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan on Tuesday.

"I've studied all these techniques," Ms. Armitage, 49, said after a recent rehearsal. "And it has become completely natural for me to use them to express my ideas. In this piece, I'm trying to convey the uncertainty

and contradictions in the human condition through showing moments of solitude, stillness and interaction. I've layered pattern upon pattern, but beyond that I'm trying to create subliminal connections between ostensibly different sensibilities."

As the hourlong work unfolds, the Bartok music ultimately gives way to the more contemplative "Unanswered Question" by Charles Ives. In the process, the distinction between the dance styles blurs: the voguers begin to partner the other dancers, and Ms. Desai melds into the larger group, her former serenity now pervading the entire dance.

Tall and thin, her blond hair cut punk style, Ms. Armitage has directed and choreographed for European ballet and opera companies as well as for films and music videos. She was dubbed the punk ballerina in 1981 after choreographing her first piece, "Drastic Classicism," which was accompanied by loud rock music. She created more of a critical buzz when she began collaborating with the visual artists Jeff Koons and David Salle



Sharmila Desai, left, Cheryl Sladkin and Ben Harris, dancers with Karole Armitage's company.

Armitage Gone! Dance

Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street.
Tuesday through next Sunday.

(He designed the new piece) and the fashion designers Jean-Paul Gaultier and Christian Lacroix.

She traces her eclectic sensibility to her youthful change from ballet to modern dance. She danced with Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, at which Balanchine was then a co-director, from 1973 to 1976, and then joined the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, where she was a member until 1981.

"Balanchine and Cunningham appear to be very different," she said. "So to switch to Cunningham, I had to work very hard intellectually and physically to see what went on below the surface — how the joints and weight were used to do the movement. I also found that they had many things in common, chiefly a sense of line and rhythmic precision."

Her familiarity with disparate styles fits well with her life as a freelance choreographer. She had just a few weeks to pull together dancers from various backgrounds for the Joyce engagement. "Within days, we had established a wonderful esprit de corps," she said.

VALERIE GLADSTONE