

# THE Arts

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 2008

## Some Insider Jokes From a Magician and His Troupe

DURHAM, N.C. — “Pure” seems like a perfect title for a work by John Jasperse, whose choreography tends to attract adjectives like austere, cerebral or stark. But the piece,

### DANCE REVIEW

ROSLYN SULCAS

commissioned by the American Dance Festival and performed for the first time Monday at the Reynolds Industries Theater at Duke University here, brought other words to mind.

Entertaining. Lush. Funny.

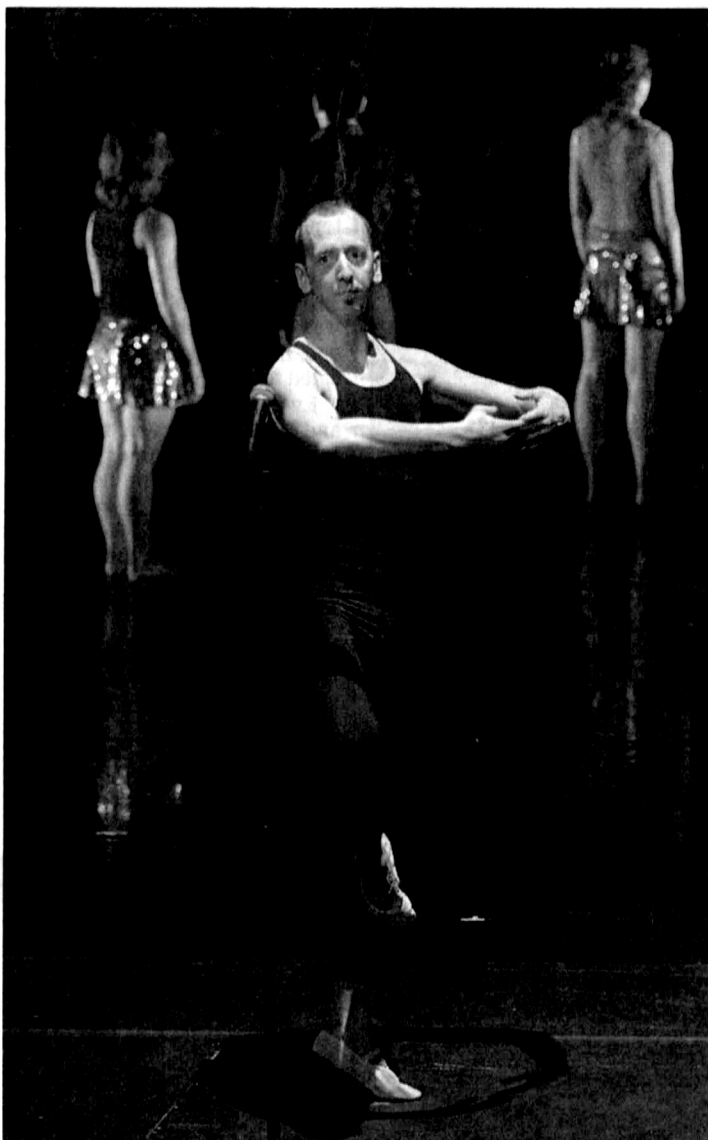
One of those funny bits has Mr. Jasperse as a hammy magician, extracting a little ball from his palm and his clothes with knowing theatrical flourishes, then disappearing behind a door, only to have one of his dancers, Erin Cornell, emerge in his place. The joke is that we can see there are no tricks. But the metaphor of theatrical magic is a central one for “Pure,” and Mr. Jasperse — who seems here to have tapped into his inner vaudevillian — is a magician of sorts.

“Pure,” the central work on a triple bill, exerts its charms from the moment the lights go up on a Murakami-like pink-flowered screen and a long floor mat on an otherwise empty stage. Rick Ross’s hip-hop track “Where My Money (I Need That)” pulsed through the air, and three dancers appeared, glamorous in sequins (silver and gold short skirts for Ms. Cornell and Eleanor Hullihan, a shimmery belt for Kayvon Pourazar).

That aura of glamour is deepened by their remoteness as they curve their bodies compellingly through space, angling their arms and rotating their wrists, lifting legs into retiré position (foot against inner knee to make a sideways triangle shape), then extending them to whip around the body. The contrast between the loud, rhythmic music and the sensuous deliberateness of the movement, etched by the burnished lighting (by Joe Levasseur and Mr. Jasperse), is simply gorgeous.

But Mr. Jasperse doesn’t allow us to wallow in the gorgeousness. He appears with a microphone and proceeds to spend a few min-

*The festival continues through July 19 at Reynolds Industries Theater, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; (919) 684-4444, [americandancefestival.org](http://americandancefestival.org).*



SARA D. DAVIS/AMERICAN DANCE FESTIVAL

John Jasperse performing “Pure,” which also features, from left, Eleanor Hullihan, Kayvon Pourazar and Erin Cornell.

### American Dance Festival Duke University

utes looking deeply into his ability to correctly execute a single pirouette, offering us his auto-corrections after each attempt. (“Perhaps if I concentrate more on simply pulling up rather than turning.”)

The audience, mostly made up of American Dance Festival students, found this absolutely hilarious, and it was funny, as was a section in which Ms. Cornell and Ms. Hullihan appear to improvise clumsily before offering a breathy verbalization of what they were thinking and feeling.

But Mr. Jasperse never gives

in to the temptation to prolong the insider jokes. Indeed he holds a stopwatch as the two women speak, and cuts the babble short with an abrupt “Time!” He makes similarly terse use of the giant figure formed by Ms. Cornell standing on Mr. Pourazar’s shoulders, with only her torso and his feet visible under a voluminous skirt. And the shadowy, hooded black figures (American Dance Festival students and faculty members recruited as extras) who scuttle furtively across the stage like multiple incarnations of Mad magazine’s “Spy vs. Spy” are funny too, and left satisfyingly unexplained.

For all its loveliness, the piece doesn’t feel entirely finished. The

final section, to Bruce Springsteen’s thumping “Glory Days” has Ms. Cornell, Ms. Hullihan and Mr. Pourazar moving with sculptural slowness on a diagonal. At their feet lie three of the black-clad figures, who turn into their shadows, echoing their movements on the floor. When the dancers finally lie down over them and the piece ends, it comes as a surprise. It feels as if there should be more of “Pure,” that the piece hasn’t found its entirely realized form.

But that’s a minor quibble given the beautiful formal movement detail, its impeccable architectural deployment in space and the work’s sheer visual loveliness. A section in which the two women appear in flower-printed pants and tops against the matching screen and floor is reminiscent of the visual magic of Robert Rauschenberg’s pointillist backdrop and costumes for Merce Cunningham’s “Summerspace.” (Both sets and costumes were designed by Mr. Jasperse, with Joey Benjamin credited as “set technician” and Melody Eggen credited with “costume construction.”)

All the virtues of “Pure” are amplified by Ms. Hullihan’s fierceness, Ms. Cornell’s louche elegance, Mr. Pourazar’s brooding intensity. These are performers who bring as much to the work as Mr. Jasperse brings to them.

The program ended with Zvi Gotheiner’s treatment of “Les Noces,” which dispenses with the original libretto of a forced betrothal. The result is well constructed and vigorously danced, but not entirely successful in its vague account of young love and lust, of both the homosexual and heterosexual varieties.

But the program began in quite another register, with Eiko & Koma’s “Rust,” commissioned by the festival in 1989. This Japanese-American duo has been creating mesmerizingly slow, agonizingly full work for more than three decades, and to see it is to experience something that has no parallel elsewhere. How do these barely moving figures, upside down in improbably angled positions against a chain-link fence, manage to suggest life, death, decay, evolution, the bodies piled in Holocaust photographs, the fetus in the womb? It’s a mystery that we are lucky to occasionally consider.