



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Anchises** Catherine Miller, left, Valda Setterfield, center, and Jonah Bokaer in this piece choreographed by Mr. Bokaer at the Abrons Arts Center.

## From a Trojan War Hero, Lessons About Aging

Jonah Bokaer — the former Merce Cunningham dancer, a choreographer, co-founder of two arts spaces and, at 29, already the subject of a book — is clearly a man of many talents. But his most notable gift may be his instinct for picking the right collaborators. His new “Anchises,” which opened at the Abrons

Arts Center on Wednesday night, is a subtle tour de force, a slowly accruing succession of images that owes its power not just to the chemistry of the exceptional performers and designers that Mr. Bokaer has assembled, but also to the rigorous focus that all bring to their task.

“Anchises” is inspired by Virgil’s account in “The Aeneid” of Aeneas’s escape from the burning city of Troy, carrying his elderly father, Anchises, on his back. But Mr. Bokaer doesn’t approach the tale literally in this work, which was first performed

“Anchises” will be performed through Sunday at the Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand Street, Lower East Side; [henrystreet.org](http://henrystreet.org).

last month in Bournemouth, England.

Instead, Mr. Bokaer offers us an oblique reflection on age through the presence of five performers, including the mesmerizing Valda Setterfield, now in her 70s; Meg Harper, in her 60s; and three dancers in their 20s: himself, the flame-haired Catherine Miller and James McGinn.

All are present at the outset, seated on or lying against squat blocks arranged in a shallow semicircle close to the front of the stage. Behind them is a stark arrangement of long plastic ropes, hanging from short, angled lengths of steel, and gathered at the bottom to form a loose hold-all for a tumbled collection of white columns. This design, by Harrison Atelier, is given equal billing with Mr. Bokaer in the program, and rightly so, since its visual power is not just retained but amplified as the piece develops.

What is perhaps most admirable about “Anchises” is Mr. Bokaer’s restraint. There are a few — but just a few — images of Ms. Setterfield or Ms. Harper on

a younger man’s shoulders. Family groupings dissolve as quickly as they are formed. Midway through the work, the plastic tubing is loosened so that the columns cascade for a quick fall of Troy, but there is little further fussing with the structure. The lighting, by Aaron Copp, is superlatively evocative without an ounce of coercion, falling in

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Inspired by Aeneas, exploring what the young owe the old.

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painterly pink-gold streams on the dancers, shadowing them in dark silhouette, or glowing deep blue behind.

Despite the program’s essays that speak of ideas about aging, “Anchises” thankfully makes no attempt to do so explicitly. Mr. Bokaer creates a shared minimal movement language, filled with repetitive gestural patterns and slow supported interactions, as

the dancers move between changing configurations of blocks and columns that they build into walls, rooms, beds, chairs, barriers. (The only overwrought moment comes when they rush around, sacking Troy and throwing props into the air.)

There are images of tenderness and dependency as the dancers repeatedly lean their heads into each other’s hands, and their bodies against one another, and occasional brief solos for Ms. Miller (captivatingly sensual) and Mr. McGinn that make more extended use of the younger performers’ physicality and fleetingly suggest rebellion, fear or passion.

But Mr. Bokaer lets these ideas come and go; the movement is just one part of “Anchises,” in which a sculptural stillness is equally pertinent. Here Ms. Setterfield — an artist with an ineffable power of focus — is unequalled. At the end, as she stares remorselessly at her fate, then lays her head gently down, watched tenderly by the others, you hold your breath. Who could ask for more?