



Wherefore Art Thou, Radio?

SHAKESPEARE VIA RADIOHEAD IS A SNAPPY GOOD TIME
AND VEGGETTI'S *BACCHAE* IS POWERFUL

But all-Balanchine disappoints at the Joyce, and *Outer Space* is a void

By Robert Gottlieb

DANCE

Romeo and Juliet is easy—we know the story, after all. Still, choreographers can't resist it, and the latest of them—Edward Clug (Romanian), head of Ballet Maribor (Slovenian)—does offer a new slant. First of all, Juliet survives. (Actually, we've encountered this approach before, in a spoof in which R. & J. both live on, in nearby Mantua, trapped in a bickering, after-the-bloom-is-off, you-take-out-the-garbage kind of marriage.) The new work—tricked out with handsome Renaissance-y back projections—also pulls a switch musically: not Prokofiev, not Delius, not Tchaikovsky. Instead, we have Radiohead, that portentous-pop supergroup—which explains why the name of this ballet is *Radio and Juliet*. (Among the Radiohead numbers deployed: "Idioteque," "Like Spinning Plates" and "We Suck Young Blood.")

Like its music, the choreography is deadly serious—it's one long flashback, as Juliet, kneeling beside dead Romeo, recalls her story. There are seven dancers: Juliet herself (in a variety of corsets) plus six guys in black, their bare chests peeking out from their open shirts. She doesn't seem much more interested in Romeo (Radio?) than in the others, but then Mercutio always steals the show. Nothing is literal, but we can infer the ball scene (white masks), the balcony scene (pecking in silhouette), the fight scenes. A lot of the movement is exciting—fierce kicks, violent twitching; snatches of break-dancing. This Juliet is far from passive—she's snappy. The guys whip through things ardently. This is far from the worst R. & J. we've ever seen, and it's been successfully playing around the country over the past few years.

The most interesting thing about it in New York was the audience, which filled the big Skirball theater down at N.Y.U. This was no ordinary ballet audience though: I'd guess that three-quarters of it was young adult. They'd come for Radio, not Juliet, but they had a good time, and I had a good time watching them have it.

I had a different kind of good time a few nights later watching Luca Veggetti's interpretation of (he calls it "a meditation" on) another great play, Euripides' *The Bacchae*, one of the most powerful and mysterious of Greek dramas. This was the first offering from the newly reconstituted company called Morphoses since Christopher Wheeldon suddenly abandoned it to his co-founder, the beautiful, one-time Balanchine ballerina Lourdes Lopez. Now it's bringing in a different artistic director (and mostly different dancers) every year.

Mr. Veggetti is one of those European choreographers who's everywhere—slick, efficient, sometimes effective, and most of all, productive.

As is true of *Radio and Juliet*, there's no attempt at the literal here, and because Euripides' play not only is less well known than R. & J. but is deeply obscure in itself, creating a danced version of it is a daunting challenge.

As a dance work, Mr. Veggetti's *Bacchae* only partly succeeds; for one thing, it certainly doesn't make its narrative intentions easy to grasp. But as a theater work attempting to suggest the nature of ancient Greek drama, it has remarkable intelligence, and many powerful effects. There are countless ways of presenting Greek theater, since we know so little of what the Greeks themselves did, and much of what I've seen has struck me as utterly spurious. Here the combination of the mysterious lighting, the resonant and gnarly music (featuring an amazing contrabass flute, taller than the woman playing it) and the semi-stylized, semi-hieratic movement gave me at moments the sense that this might be the real thing—or at least one possible real thing. Only the moments of speech seemed inadequate—dancers, for the most part, just aren't vocal actors. No one understood this better than Martha Graham, our foremost interpreter of the great Greek stories, who always brought in an experienced actress to speak whatever text was involved. (Who could forget Marian Seldes striding across the stage trailing bolts of cloth in something called *Mendicants of Evening*?)

Mr. Veggetti's dancers were uniformly strong and committed. With her supple and strong body, magnificent Frances Chiaverini as Dionysus dominated the stage, and City Ballet soloist Adrian Danchig-Waring, as the doomed King Pentheus whom Dionysus lures to his destruction, revealed a force that we haven't previously realized was in him. All in all, this inventive and mostly persuasive *Bacchae* bodes well for the new Morphoses.

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There's no one the New York dance world honors more highly than Suzanne Farrell, always (and rightly) referred to as Balanchine's greatest muse. She's not only remembered as a great dancer and a great artist (not always the same thing), but for the past decade she's been recognized as both a superb coach and a leading force in preserving Balanchine ballets and style. Her company—the Suzanne Farrell Ballet—has been supported from the start by the Kennedy Center in Washington, where she most frequently performs, although we've also seen her in New York over the years.

Recently she brought her dancers to the Joyce for an all-Balanchine program that, alas, was a disappointment. In Washington, a week or so earlier, she had successfully presented two major works, *Serenade* and *Concerto Barocco*, both too large for the Joyce stage. In addition, in Washington she had a live orchestra, and a wider choice of dancers. The constricted New York stage plus dancing to taped music inevitably diminished the effect her company made, but there were other negative factors as well.

Yes, it was good to see the 1947 *Haieff Divertimento*, last performed here in 1993 as part of a City Ballet Balanchine retrospective, but this is not a major work. Acknowledging that fact—supremely practical and always a genius at recycling; a firm believer in "waste not, want not"—Balanchine cannibalized it in a number of later pieces, most obviously *Square Dance*: the jaunty youthfulness, the relaxed yet formal courtesy of the dancers to one another. (Even the pale blue costumes are related). The Farrell company presented it respectfully, almost clinically, but could not make a case for it (and its less-than-great score) as more than an historically interesting addition to the Balanchine repertory. It barely survived the cautious, stiff dancing it received.

When it came to the "Diamonds" pas de deux—one of Ms. Farrell's greatest roles—the results were disastrous. The ballerina I saw, Violeta Angelova, was hopelessly out of her league, with absolutely no amplitude—perhaps the defining Farrell

characteristic. She was correct, but correctness isn't the secret of "Diamonds," on top of which, although this is a work for only two dancers, it looked cramped at the Joyce. With Balanchine it's not a question of how many people are on the stage; it's that his works require air and space.

As for *Meditation*, the rapt duet Balanchine created for Jacques d'Amboise and Farrell back in 1963, the male partner is meant to be a seasoned man looking back at a girl he's never forgotten. In this performance he looked less experienced than the young girl he was remembering. Even so, Ms. Farrell's girl—Courtney Anderson—gave the one thrilling performance of the season. She underlined what was lacking in the rest of the company: large-scale intensity. *Agon*, which closed the program, got a clean, careful reading, with Michael Cook a standout in the man's pas de trois; it too, though, looked uncomfortable on the Joyce stage.

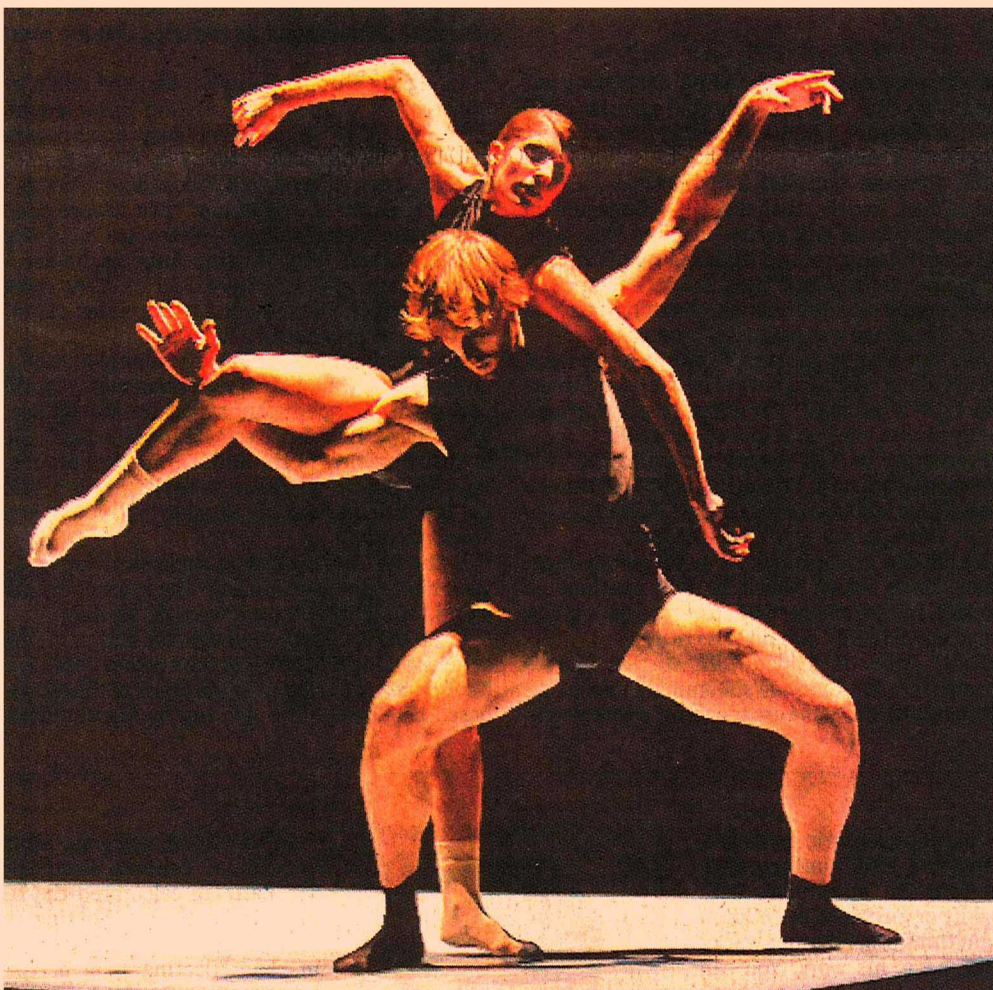
Finally, the program itself was unfortunately constructed. The two short pas de deux were bookended by interminable intermissions—13 or so minutes of dance surrounded by two black holes. We need Suzanne Farrell in New York, but we need her unhampered by a constricted stage and what is essentially a brave but second-level pick-up act.

What's the right word for William Forsythe's *I don't believe in outer space*? Awful? Dreadful? Let's settle for execrable. Mr. Forsythe is dubious enough in his serious mode; when he turns zany (his own word), we're out of the frying pan and the fire, and into hell. There are round black objects all over the floor of the stage. There's endless running and shrieking. Also endless gnomic narrative ("As if by chance things are falling on us ... as if by chance things are being thrown up"). There's convulsing and mumbling and snatches of well-known lyrics ("I put a spell on you"; "I will survive"). On it goes, and on and on. It's dance by assault.

This 2008 work appeared as part of BAM's Next Wave Festival, but it isn't even New let alone Next; today it's as corny as Kansas in August. Poor Pina Bausch is prematurely gone from us, but her melody lingers on—though exploited rather than honored. The BAM audience was besotted.

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Frances Chiaverini and Adrian Danchig-Waring in Veggetti's *The Bacchae*.

CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN