



DECEMBER 6-12, 2002

## Dance

■ PERFORMANCE/PREVIEW

# American Pastoral

Doug Varone returns with a love letter from the Heartland



BY BRIAN MCCORMICK

■ BLOW UP Doug Varone and dancers in *Bottomland*.

Doug Varone, one of the busiest American modern dance choreographers (and deservedly so), has expanded his choreographic influence with forays into figure skating, musical theater, fashion shows, and opera. That he has done so while creating a range of captivating and complex new works for his own company gives a good sense of how far his stride can reach.

The Varones, as they are affectionately called, are home for the holidays this year presenting their latest, greatest work, *The Bottomland*, starring the steadfast company (Larry Hahn, Eddie Taketa, Adrienne Fang, Daniel Charon, Faye Driscoll, John Beasant III, Natalie Desch, Catherine Miller, and Stephanie Liapis) with guest Nina Watt. *The Bottomland* is a two-part, evening-length performance that integrates dance, music, theater, video, and a movable set to look at the changing lives of an imagined rural Kentucky community.

Part one, *Songs that Tell a Story* is set to music by native Kentuckian Patty Loveless and features giant video images of the dancers at Mammoth Cave National Park, both outside and inside the caves. The dance was commissioned by the Wolf Trap Center for the Performing Arts (their third for Face of America, a project to celebrate National

Parks using the performing arts). Literally and figuratively, the larger-than-life video reflects and magnifies the dancers on stage—if not their actions, which is often the case, then their emotions.

Part two, titled *As Told at Night, When the Air is a Different Color*, features dancing that is more austere, but with the same satisfying patterns, variations, and intricacies that Varone fans crave. The movement is even more gestural; the controlling factors are more theatrical. In part two, the dramatic tension introduced in part one is resolved. At the center of the circumstances is a duet between Hahn and Watt, seated at a table. The motions are small, yet brimming—these are performers in full control of their stuff. Watt, who bears some resemblance to Sissy Spacek is easily as convincing an actress as the Oscar winner; her performance gets under your skin. We believe her grief, her alien-

ation; we identify with her when Hahn leaves her to dance with Desch, her younger reflection.

Varone has fashioned a richly textured American drama, one that capitalizes on all of the elements he has woven into the fabric. He and his dancers have created characters whose persona, situations, and activities feel real. In *The Bottomland*, the choreography is pared down, allowing more to be seen. Foreground, middle ground, and background are ingeniously manipulated here, creating rich harmonious patterns that repeat and neatly vary. The effect created in part one with the performers in front of video is simulated and refracted in part two with these techniques. The shift from two-dimensional video to three-dimensional sets in the second—small movable houses on casters—also blurs the transitions, like a dream into waking.

That said, Varone is, in his own words, “a very musical

### THE BOTTOMLAND

Doug Varone and Dancers  
The Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street  
Tue-Fri at 8 p.m., Sat at 7:30 & 10 p.m., Sun at 4 & 7 p.m.  
\$25-32; 212.279.4200,  
ticketcentral.com

choreographer.” For *As Told at Night*, Gaëten Leboeuf is writing an original score, but in rehearsal, the company has been using other music. The first day the company rehearsed with a draft of the score, everyone looked a bit bewildered. Varone, who is not performing in the work, led the group through the new cues in the music, eager to move ahead, but obviously a bit frustrated with the scoring process. “If there’s one thing this has taught me,” he said, “it’s about better articulating my needs.”

*Doug Varone and Dancers will present two more world premieres on an evening of Varone dances to music by Steve Reich at Symphony Space, June 5-7, 2003.*