

Dance/Marcia B. Siegel

WHERE UP MEETS DOWN

“...Dance Theater of Harlem seemed more comfortable and expressive in modern ballets than doing Balanchine’s classics...”

The woman coming down the aisle said to her companion, “I’ll be interested to see how this compares to the Alvin Ailey.” It would be some kind of irony if, after ten years of trying to look like a classical ballet company, **Dance Theater of Harlem** comes off as a black dance company. At City Center recently, DTH did seem in constant suspension between uptown and downtown.

Classical technique and choreography, particularly the dances of George Balanchine, have formed the pedagogical chassis on which the DTH style and repertory are hung. His chamber-size, rigorous ballets don’t allow dancers any place to hide, and they’re excellent teaching pieces. Yet, for the most part, DTH doesn’t do Balanchine very well.

There seem to be serious lapses in the training. Many dancers are not well turned-out—this rotated distortion of the legs not only forms the basic engineering of ballet steps, but is deeply ingrained in the aesthetics of ballet, in the way a ballet dancer should look. There’s no complete agreement about the alignment of the body either; the allowance for sidling hips and projecting rib cages and sunken chests seems too generous. Most disturbing, the dancers can’t meet the strictest demands of turning and footwork, though they’re spectacular jumpers and strong in adagio work.

Not that these difficulties don’t exist in other companies, or that Balanchine’s own New York City Ballet dancers don’t have even more glaring ones on occasion. But DTH doing Balanchine often seems insecure, not only about the steps but about how to perform the work. In the classical pieces, like *Serenade* and *Allegro Brillante*, the dancers look slow and soft, almost lethargic; you wonder why they can’t keep up with the music. In the jazzy *Agon* they look livelier, but they seem to derive their attack not from the classical apparatus of Stravinsky but from some physical liberation implied in Balanchine’s use of the body. I thought *Four Temperaments*, which they were showing for the first time, looked quite



Tap-happy: Jane Goldberg, Bubba Gaines.

authentic, though here as in *Bugaku* the dancers seemed to think they had to dramatize relationships that were already clear from the choreography.

The company seemed more comfortable and more expressive in modern ballets where form was a relative matter, subordinate to physicality, theatrics, and the exoticism of rippling black muscles. The two long non-Balanchine programs offered a seemingly endless assortment of topical divertissements: triangle ballets, acrobatic ballets, rhythm ballets, a primitive number, an all-male number, a cocktail-party vignette that could have come verbatim from a Broadway musical. These were all ballets where “sell” was crucial, and the message was driven home by the glitzy costuming and Edward Efron’s annoyingly dark atmospheric lighting.

Choo San Goh, who deals, like Balanchine, in classical form and structure, did *Introducing . . .*, a pleasant piece, to Stravinsky’s “Ebony” Concerto, that started out to make no concessions but descended into cuteness and trickery about halfway through. Carmen de Lavallade’s *Sensemaya*, a high-powered enactment of a Mayan creation myth, appealed only to the part of me that could ignore its sexist implications. A troupe of warriors literally tear apart two women, who represent an impossi-

bly threatening “great female Earth Monster” that has to be dismembered and put safely in its place as Heaven and Earth before the world can get going.

The other work that impressed me was Robert North’s *Troy Game*, a sort of locker-room Olympics composed like a dance class—a nonstop string of across-the-floor repeating phrases powered by exciting, much more complex Latin drumming and percussion music. The eleven DTH men, letting loose their high, power-packed jumps, competitiveness, and badass vitality, erased the air of self-consciousness and narcissism that came across to me when I saw the London Contemporary Dancers do the piece some years ago.

If Arthur Mitchell’s Dance Theater of Harlem is trying to make a point about black dancers’ being able to do white dance, the tap revival is making inroads in the opposite direction. Critic, historian, and tapper **Jane Goldberg** and her teacher-partner, Charles “Cookie” Cook, gave a set of performances entitled *Shoot Me While I’m Happy* at American Theater Lab, assisted by Leslie “Bubba” Gaines, Marion Coles, and other veterans and novices of our most engaging native dance form. The programs were informal, more like a cabaret act than a concert, and unaffectedly embraced all kinds of material, from traditional tap to nostalgia, comedy, jazz, new choreography, and old routines, with good humor and much mutual admiration.

Goldberg is doing something that eludes many who try to reconstruct old dance styles. She’s understood tap as a mode that wears well on different performers. Tap is all about form and rhythm. It can generate tremendous variety through individual manipulation of a relatively small vocabulary, and it can acquire great personal meaning precisely because each performer employs it to express his own beat. Come to think of it, tap has a lot in common with ballet. And wasn’t Arthur Mitchell the hooper hero in Balanchine’s 1968 revival of *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*? Small world. ■