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‘Remains’ Review: Using Art History to Shape Bodies

References from the Madonna and Child to Matisse abound in John Jasperse’s latest offering.



A scene from ‘Remains’ PHOTO: GRANT HALVERSON

By **ROBERT GRESKOVIC**

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Brooklyn, N.Y.

John Jasperse has been working with his own groups of dancers since 1989, intriguingly blending pedestrian activity with frequently sensual, formal arrangements, often with

matter-of-fact gender reversals. Along the way, he has created 17 evening-length works; four have been featured in the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s annual Next Wave Festival. Each took shape as often spare but compellingly calibrated movement within settings as visually unusual as their elements were essentially plain—expanses of dangling plastic coat hangers, collections of plastic water bottles, and tangles of orange electrical cords linger memorably from the 2007 “Misuse Liable to Prosecution.”

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Last week, the 52-year-old choreographer’s latest work, the hour-long “Remains”—co-commissioned by BAM and the American Dance Festival, where it had its

premiere in July—helped kick off this year’s Next Wave Festival. Mr. Jasperse eschews explanatory program notes for BAM, but his John Jasperse Projects website says the six-dancer work “explores how the remnants from our actions that remain in our wake create a context for the future.” The dancemaker says in a BAM website video that “remains” evokes both “residue” and the “act of remaining.”

In the video Mr. Jasperse flips through such sources from art history as those depicting Madonna and Child and Pieta imagery and what he calls lounging nudes. At a BAM talk, the choreographer mentioned any number of well-known images, confirming what I recognized when I saw “Remains” two days earlier—that the recumbent pose taken by Maggie Cloud at the start was that of the “Sleeping Hermaphroditus” sculpture known from Roman copies. As to his audiences’ awareness of these specific references—I identified configurations from Botticelli, Raphael and Canova, as well as poses from Matisse paintings and sculptures, not to mention groupings suggesting compositions familiar from depictions of the descent from the cross or the entombment of Christ—Mr. Jasperse added that while his dance was “rife with citations,” it “really didn’t matter if [audiences] know what they are.”

Within the BAM Harvey’s cavernous stage space, “Remains” starts handsomely but somewhat uneasily. The setting devised by Mr. Jasperse and Lenore Doxsee has a glassy floor framed, box-like, by four wide slats that glow in Ms. Doxsee’s vivid lighting. Ms. Cloud, reclining center stage in one of Baille Younkman’s trim, stylish costumes, appears asleep.

After she is revealed by the slow rise of the front curtain while the house lights remain up and the last audience members file in, we’re left puzzling: Has the performance begun? Should we stop conversing? Eventually, once the auditorium dims, a good six

minutes into this start, “Remains” proceeds to draw us into its animated poses as well as to its sustained movements that delicately recycle or echo previous dances, recalling Mr. Jasperse’s own works as well as moments from, perhaps, Martha Graham, Lucinda Childs, Merce Cunningham and Vaslav Nijinsky. During his talk, Mr. Jasperse said he was bemused by a review that said he’d made reference to the body language of Igor, the lab flunky in Mel Brooks’s “Young Frankenstein.”

John King’s electronic music comes and goes, with the intermittent bouts of silence feeling at least as dramatic as the eerie, metallic reverberations. At times the witty side of Mr. Jasperse surfaces, particularly as the score, with additional music by Javier Peral, Nino Rota and Émile Vacher, injects old world, popular airs into the sometimes stark poetics of the choreography. When, for example, the action presents all six dancers tripping over the stage in geometric patterns, the mood turns gently giddy; elsewhere, for duets that incorporate the physicality of wrestling entanglements, the sheer gravity of the moves adds gravitas to the proceedings.

Finally, about 55 minutes in, just as “Remains” feels as if it’s repeating itself without elaborating on its recycled elements, the full cast re-enters in spangled versions of their simply cut costuming. Three dancers take center stage and remain in place; the other three pace the perimeter. All the while, over some of Mr. King’s more sharp and spare sounds, we hear Mr. Jasperse prompting his dancers to move “back” or “forward.”

The three traveling dancers at the margins most noticeably follow these cues, advancing and receding accordingly. The three stationary dancers heed these commands more subtly, internally—shifting in place almost imperceptibly. While their costumes glint in the fading light, their actions embody the very motivations of “Remains.” We see their back and forth moves as a reminder of the looking back Mr. Jasperse did to head into the future.

Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.

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