

S.J. Edelheit
On Watching Dance

I've never been much of a dancer, though certainly I've enjoyed snapping my fingers and jumping around to music in my living room from time to time. And when my wife and I occasionally went to some affair, a wedding perhaps, or a party, or a rare church social, I would regularly set out to embarrass her on the dance floor and I would regularly succeed. Sooner or later, I would drop into my Groucho pose, slouching down with my arm about her waist and my face pressed below her chest. I'd then lead her slinkingly around the room while she simultaneously slapped me on the head, pleading with me to stop, and laughing hysterically. Such were my experiences in the realm of dance.

But recently a friend wise in the ways of dance, a dancer herself, dragged me off to a concert of new work by local choreographers. This was to be all very "modern," she told me, and I was under the impression she expected me to behave myself. Now, modern dance to me conjured up no clear image whatever. Oh, I had seen Pilobolus many years ago and remember being much taken by their acrobatic, athletic pilings on. I liked that stuff, I told myself. But would I like *this* stuff. "Modern," after all, could mean anything. I suppose it meant it wasn't ancient dance, no ballroom, tango, or powwow stepping. I knew that much. So I was both curious and a little apprehensive.

The studio where the concert was to be held was on a side street in Cambridge, one filled with unassuming, pastel row houses and lots of concrete. Not a tree in sight. We paid our way in and climbed a narrow, rickety staircase to the third floor. The studio was a large black-box space with bleacher seating on one end. The crowd looked diverse and friendly enough, though a good half of them seemed to be dressed in black. Was there some dress code for dance concerts I should have been made aware of? I already felt uncomfortable.

I picked up the program and scanned the list of works: "A Dance for the Masses;" "Tidal Stops;" "Perch." For this last, I had an image of a dancer making dovining, pigeon movements while balanced on a beam. But maybe it referred to the fish and not to a bird in a cage. I was already confused. Was I ready for this? Soon, the curator of the show appeared, a thin, pleasant young man in a black T-shirt. He must have described the program, but all I heard was "seventy minutes, no intermission." Okay. I can do that. No problem. Then the lights went off.

I found myself peering longingly at the red-lit exit signs and tried not to be claustrophobic. There was a prolonged hush as we sat there in the pitch dark of the black box. This is not good, I thought, and tried to breathe evenly, deeply. Then lights filtered slowly on, illuminating the floor in front of us to reveal three dancers: a middle-aged man with a shaved head dressed in rumpled street clothes; and two women, one young, white, strong-looking; the other older, Asian, with short, well-cut, shiny black hair. They began to move together or rather bounce off, hold, reflect one another, accompanied by a strange sound track of city noises and voices mixed with a music that seemed not quite identifiably Chinese.

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

I watched these bodies revolve in space, join and dissect from one another, and I was transfixed. The controlled, flowing athleticism, the expressionless faces and hyper-expressive movement was mesmerizing. As the bodies came together and whirled apart, I found myself focusing on the Asian woman, blocking out the others. She was quite thin but so strongly balanced, so finely toned, she seemed a force unto herself, a wave of light and motion. Midway through, the music came to a stop and there was a prolonged pause. All three dancers stood with their backs to the audience. I watched the Asian woman, her deep breathing making her shoulders rise and fall like wings.

When the sound track kicked back on, the three dancers began enfold-ing their bodies around, through, over one another, one of the women be-ing shed from the man and the other taking her place. It seemed an elabo-rate seduction and rejection. But there was no winning or losing here. Just varieties of movement, and it was the movement that was the real seduc-tion. At least for me.

The music came to a stop, the lights flicked off, then on again, and the applause began. The dancers only modestly nodded toward the audience as they made ready to skip off stage. But as the Asian woman turned away to run to the exit, I noticed her smile. Her lips turned up on one side, like Leslie Caron, the French actress, whose lopsided smile had always won my heart whatever role she played.

I leaned back in my seat, and it was only when my friend touched my arm that I realized I was still clapping after everyone else had stopped. "That was great," I mumbled, as the lights went off again and the next group of dancers hurried out to take their place in the dark.

So what I learned is that when it comes to dance there is a place for Grouchoing and being silly and having fun. But there is also a realm that belongs to watching. It's obvious to say there can be a magic to bodies in motion. And, of course, I'd always known and appreciated this watch-ing sports, the grace and power and glide of a Michael Jordan, the silky smoothness of the Kenyan marathoners. But now I know to watch for it in this, too, this choreography called modern dance. Sometimes it doesn't work for me and the movements seem deliberately clunky, forced, and pe-dantic. But when it does work, when there's that fusion of design and just pure body flow, it unleashes in me an explosion of delight and wonder. What a gift this is, these bodies we have and what we can do with them! Well, not me, Groucho of the dance floor, but that dancer, say, with the Leslie Caron smile and the liquid body. I could watch her dance forever, advancing and receding, wave and form, muscle and spirit transformed and transforming.