

From the Vault, a Complex Ostrich and Sculptural Movement

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

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DURHAM, N.C. — The American Dance Festival's 75th-anniversary celebration has historical implications worth addressing. It tells us that before Balanchine started work on American soil in 1934, there was already enough American dance to make much of.

But how many pre-1934 made-in-America dances have most of today's dancegoers seen? What else other than Martha Graham's "Lamentation" (1930)? Reconstructions of Isadora Duncan's repertory are basically works of historical imagination, though some are inspired. Revivals of dances by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn tend to look ludicrously thin. And only a truly rare account of Doris Humphrey's dances makes her look like more than a dutiful craftswoman.

Until this week, Asadata Dafora was a dancer and dancemaker who lived for me principally in the 1940s reviews of Edwin Denby and whose work I had never expected to see. But the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company of Ohio, which specializes in African-American repertory, has reconstructed from film his "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich," a dance he made in 1932, three years after arriving in the United States from his native Sierra Leone. The performance, by G. D. Harris, is so vivid that it has single-handedly altered my notion of the pre-1934 American dance scene.

This "Ostrich" solo could so easily be total cliché. The male dancer, wearing nothing but a loincloth padded with ostrich-plume skirting, embodies the giant bird: he does the staccato turns of the head and the rippling wing movements that occur in sundry other bits of better-known bird choreography.

But Carl Riley's music — rhythmic African drumming and slow flute melody — adds its own coolly double-layered atmosphere; and the choreography makes the ostrich inward and complex, now crouched, now circling his pelvis, now letting the ripples of motion pass in to and out from the torso. It would be good to see this on the same program as Merce Cunningham's 1975 "Solo" (in which Mr. Cunningham seemed to become one animal after another); there is a resemblance.

Such a revival is ideal for the American Dance Festival's anniversary. On the evidence of this and the other two dances it performed on the program (presented from Sunday through Tuesday and seen on Monday), the Dayton company is an exceptional troupe.

Eleo Pomare's "Desenamoradas" (1967), a modern-dance version of Lorca's play "The House of Bernarda Alba," is another work that could so easily be passé: it is melodramatically overwrought. But these dancers show why it is also the opposite: full of powerfully sculptural modernist movement and rhythmic tension. Doubtless it was heavily derivative of Graham when new, but now it has a rich dance force that Graham's own works seldom receive.

Better yet is "Mourner's Bench," a solo from Talley Beatty's "Southern Landscape" (1947), as danced — to the spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead" — by William B. McClellan Jr. It becomes a perfect oxymoron: tight control over agitating emotion, a fluttering hand set against a rock-firm through-the-body dance shape, stylistic rigor through which pain sets up an almost ecstatic vibration. I hope to see more of these marvelous Dayton dancers; they rewrite major pages of the history of American choreography by dancing them.

Here they share a program with a company no less history laden, the Limón Dance Company in this, the centenary year of its founder, the choreographer José Limón. But since few of us are familiar with any Limón choreography, it's a pity that one of the company's three offerings here is by Jiri Kylian instead. "Evening Songs," to choral music by Dvorak, is superior Kylian, a precisely drawn study of the unsmiling dignity of unsophisticated folk in ritual mode that feels like solidly admirable earthenware. It draws more attention to its construction than to any details animating its characters.

The Bach solo "Chaconne" (1942) is sometimes spoken of as one of Limón's finest works, and I hope to like it one day. But Roxane d'Orléans Juste is not the dancer to make its case to me. Exalted by noble suffering, she dances this as if it were the Holy Cross she is carrying all the way to Calvary, and robs it of all freshness. Better is the company's account of Limón's most famous work, "The Moor's Pavane" (1949). Though its subtitle is "Variations on the Theme of Othello," it does not make a particularly revealing response to that Shakespeare play.

As a pavane to Purcell music, though, it is a shining example of American modern dance's onetime fascination with the forms of pre-Romantic European social dance. The Moor, his Friend, and their Wives never leave the stage and never violate the formal composure of the courtly dance. The tragedy's main episodes (huge emphasis on the handkerchief) are sketched over in terms of transient duets that illustrate the marriages, the friendships, the "We women!" complaints, the male-male colloquies. And each return to full quartet shows a different public drama.

I've long thought it was time we saw an "Othello" with Iago played by an actor with darker skin than that of Othello (I can think of several pairings that might make this work brilliantly), and I'm happy to record that the Limón company — Raphael Boumaila as the Moor, Jonathan Frederickson as his Friend — is doing just this.