



## Dance Umbrella Part III ✓

by

STEPHANIE JORDAN and HOWARD FRIEND ✓

I am glad that the London Umbrella ended so splendidly with *Fase, Four Movements on the Music of Steve Reich* by Belgian Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker. She has not yet developed a following here, but judging by the enthusiastic reception given to her and partner Michele Anne De Mey, she soon will.

The phase basis of Reich's music, its persistent repetition with barely perceptible evolution, is the foundation for De Keersmaecker's structures. In *Piano Phase*, a twenty-three minute duet of unison arm swinging,

stepping in and out of synchronisation, various moments in the repeated material are gradually elongated or presented with new, fierce attack. *Violin Phase* is a long, exhausting solo for De Keersmaecker, who turns and decorates the perimeter and radii of a large circle with a myriad of firm arm- and leg-motivated actions and body pulses. *Clapping Music* is a brief duet passage across the stage diagonal, simple motions that you could count on one hand, out of and back into unison. Though based on similar structural principles to the other duets, *Come Out* acquires strong dramatic overtones: a darkened stage, the two performers on stools, each under the glare of overhead lamps, and Reich's score, its source some words from a statement by a black victim of police brutality during interrogation. The women face forward or rotate. Pumping arms, a cutting action of a hand across the throat, a jolt backwards of the neck, pressure on the head into an awkward twisted position are only a few of the gestures that etch the tortured picture.

De Keersmaecker's movement is idiosyncratic and vibrant. Though the pace might not always be fast, energy is high, broken by a sudden halt or brief moment of relaxation. There is no sense of this energy being expended, rather of its gathering power. The means are economical, the structural concerns, musical selection and the costumes — just trousers, shirts, simple dresses, big white gym shoes — interchangeable across the pieces. Always, the programme is exploratory and conceived thoroughly. Under simple but highly imaginative lighting, each work faces up to a different set of problems and spatial concerns.

## De Keersmaecker ICA

By the tail end of a five-week-long Dance Umbrella, one approaches performances by unknown quantities with a justifiable wariness. All we knew of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker was that she came from Brussels, of all places, and that her dances, according to the pre-publicity, went on and on and on 'like life itself'. There was no assurance that what she did, under the title *Phase*, would even resemble dancing: whatever it was, she was going to do it to the music of Steve Reich, which certainly does go on.

The lights went up on two girls, one dark, one fair, wearing similar grey dresses with loose, swinging skirts. To the repetitive patterns of Reich's *Piano Phase*, they paced out a simple combination of step. step. step. change direction, their arms and skirts swirling across their bodies. Initially, they restricted themselves to a single plane of movement, close to the plain white backdrop: two girls, four shadows. It was the shadows that first alerted me to the fact that, almost imperceptibly, the dancers were going out of phase with each other, before slipping back into the same mesmerising rhythm. I could not tell how it happened – which dancer initiated the change, or how they managed to get the distances between them so precise that their circling arms almost touched but never quite did. I think that their marginal changes in direction and timing coincided with the minimal shifts in and out of phase of the piano notes – but I cannot be sure. The combined effect of music and movement was hypnotic and demanding at the same time: let your concentration slip for a moment and you might miss a tiny, vital change.

The dancers moved, ever so gradually, closer to the audience and then withdrew back to their original plane. I assumed that the leader was the one with very short dark hair and that she was Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, on the grounds that she was the more emphatic, the more decisive of the two. The fair girl is indeed her partner, Michele Anne de Mey; but it turned out that there was no leader in this section: either one could initiate certain actions. It was impossible to tell how long the piece lasted. Though it seemed like forever, it was curiously refreshing – a steady stream of energy that swept dancers and audience along with it.

In the second section, both dancers, dressed in green fatigues, remained seated beneath suspended lamps. This time, the movement was all in their arms – a set of repeated gestures like hand jive that interlock-

ed as the performers revolved on their chairs. Reich's sounds were made of a spoken phrase, 'Come out to show you'. As the words went out of phase, they began to sound like an engine chuffing, while the performers looked more and more like the component parts of a precision machine. However, the emotional intensity they put into measuring out each movement, each angle of intersection, meant that they never became mere automata. The compelling quality, the feeling that not just the performance but life itself depended on getting it just right, was even clearer in de Keersmaecker's solo to Reich's *Violin Phase*. She started by spinning slowly in space, with only her face and shoulders lit. As the light widened into a large circle, she paced out its circumference, her arms flailing like one of those whirling gauges that measure the speed of the wind. Then, as the violin accreted notes, she elaborated her basic stepping phrases until she was leaping, dipping and spinning, bisecting and slicing her circle in a complex geometry. She stopped looking programmed and became a girl in a swinging dress, actively enjoying her own skill in moving.

The lighter mood continued into the fourth and final section, to *Clapping Music* (the same infectious clapping rhythms that Micha Bergese uses in his *Encore* for Mantis). The two girls, in grey shirts and trousers, returned to the pacing patterns of the

first section, but this time in profile. Instead of steps and spins, they used bounces and a swaying movement that brought them on to the tips of their heavy white shoes, knees bending at identical angles – until, like the hand claps, they went increasingly out of phase with each other. By the conclusion, they were back in unison in time for our applause.

Who would have thought that Brussels would produce something so original and so satisfying? True, both dancers trained at Bejart's Mudra Centre there, but Bejart is not renowned for his rigour and simplicity. De Keersmaecker as a choreographer has the same obsessional quality and fascination with the effects of repetition that the American, Lucinda Childs, has. But the 22-year-old de Keersmaecker has a freshness and energy that is all her own.

Jann Parry

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