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Going Back to Her Roots, Sometimes in Sync, Sometimes Not

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker Reprises Her ‘Fase’

By BRIAN SEIBERT JULY 9, 2014

“Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich,” by the Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, is a remarkable work, adopting the methods of American Minimalism while swerving away from its ascetic tone. When Ms. De Keersmaeker created it, in the early 1980s, she was barely 20, a student at New York University. And on Tuesday, when “Fase” was performed at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College, that amazing precocity was matched by longevity: The choreographer, at 54, dancing her demanding composition with as much electricity as ever.

The performance was the beginning of the Lincoln Center Festival’s presentation of four of Ms. De Keersmaeker’s early works, the blazing beginnings of a major career. “Fase,” the first of these pieces, is, as its title indicates, set to music by Steve Reich: four compositions (seminal ones from the ’60s and ’70s) based on the process of “phasing,” in which two repeated lines go in and out of sync.

Ms. De Keersmaeker’s choreography — three duets and a solo — responds to Mr. Reich’s methods. Two women (on Tuesday Ms. De Keersmaeker and the much younger Tale Dolven) execute the same simple phrases over and over. They, too, go in and out of sync. But the impeccably structured choreography also deviates from the process, resists it, goes its own way.

In “Piano Phase,” the two women periodically pull up short, and

their swinging limbs, slowing as they fight momentum, suggest something like longing. In “Come Out,” Mr. Reich’s dephasing of a taped voice produces a rumble and whirl like that of machines in a factory. The two women, repeating upper-body gestures as they sit on stools in shirts and slacks, could be factory laborers. When they stop, they look stricken, arrested by some memory, before snapping out of it and getting back to work.

This acknowledgment of the unavoidably human dancer in the mechanical process — this drama — was Ms. De Keersmaecker’s swerve from her models in American postmodern dance. Much of the vocabulary is pedestrian: walks, turns, hops. The spatial patterning is lucid: horizontal planes, a circle and its radii. But emotions, not quite controllable, keep surfacing.

There’s ferocity in how the dancers whip around and bite off phrase endings, audibly hissing. There’s a flamencolike flair to some gestures and the slapping of the ground. That flair is feminine, even girlish. The dresses worn in the first and third sections are best described as twirly. The youthfully heedless flashing of undies rubs wonderfully against all the rigor.

There were moments on Tuesday when Ms. De Keersmaecker, a sly performer, flashed the audience a look that seemed to say, “Can you believe it?” In the post-performance discussion, an admiring Mr. Reich praised her for “emotional accuracy.” Repeating an oft-quoted line about how, in the ’60s, nobody danced in dance shows and everybody danced at the parties afterward, he said that “Anne put the party back in the dance.” That party continues through Wednesday.

The Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker series continues through Wednesday at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College, 524 West 59th Street, Clinton; 212-721-6500, lincolncenter.org.

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