

## **Joffrey Ballet**

Saturday, April 29 – Auditorium Theater, Chicago

by Joshua Siegal

### Deuce Coupe

This was one of the most interesting dance pieces I've ever seen. My mom was a big fan of the Beach Boys, so as little kids, my sisters and I spent countless car rides bopping around the backseat of the station wagon to tunes like *Honda* and *Catch a Wave*. I expected to enjoy this performance, but I was totally unprepared for the skillful manipulation of my appreciation by the choreography.

Early in the piece, I found myself smiling a lot and thinking, “now this is silly.” I don't think that silly is a bad thing, and I took it at face value that Twyla Tharp had been poking a toe in the eye of classical ballet with her piece, which, as I read in the program, debuted in Chicago in 1973 (literally a year and a half before my time).

The costumes were ridiculous, with men in dark floral shirts and red shiny pants, and the women in mostly tasteful colored dresses. And then there was the ballerina, in white, hair in a bun, with toe shoes, twirling and twiddling her way around the stage, almost oblivious to the much more modern dance going on all around her. Sometimes this worked really well, as in the opening piece (and its subsequent reprises), *Matrix 1*, which was a slow trio to solo piano. When the ballerina appeared in larger ensemble dances, she was apparently mocked by the choreography.

What really struck me, though, as the cascade of two-to-three-minute songs progressed, was whether Tharp had put much energy into the question of modern versus classical dance. At times, the ballerina limped pitifully offstage, shooed away (literally) by the voiceover that was part of the ongoing song, “shut up, go home – shut up, go home”. At

other times, she was the lyrical beacon that made the jerky, hippy movements of the other dancers seem out of place.

All of which built steadily on the question: who is paying homage to whom?

In the end, it seemed that the modern dance really was affectionate towards its more classical compatriot, and perhaps this was the point of the *Matrix* sections, where the ballet really shone.

Or perhaps Twyla Tharp was throwing all the choreography into a big sieve and trying to see what would shake out. If that was the case, it was really pleasing to see someone not discard the absurd, and instead take us by the hand through the museum, pointing out the classical masters and the giant upstarts, and then mashing them together in our brains to see how we like it.

At times I was really touched by what was going on in the piece, as when during *Mama Says*, the background dancers ended the piece in a kind of silhouette sculpture upstage and let the ballerina simply display her talents. This received spontaneous applause and was very beautiful. At other times, I simply thought, “oh Twyla Tharp must simply be thumbing her nose at the dance establishment. This is just silliness for its own sake.” And I enjoyed that, but wished it had been better synthesized.

Later on, though, thinking back about the performance, I realized that this was not the case. I now believe that the intention of the choreography was to show things working and not working, with ample humor to be sure, but also with a larger agenda: to bare a mash-up of history for all to see.

## Motown Suite

The presentation of this world premier along with *Deuce Coupe* served the latter, but not the former performance. My original intent was to see only the Tharp piece, but I stuck around to catch some sounds from the time when “rhythm and blues” was an accurate name.

The inclusion of this piece after the Tharp performance really cheapened *Deuce Coupe* and turned the whole evening into a kind of Broadway-style review. Although it was nice to have my 21<sup>st</sup>-Century attention span so slavishly served, the parade-of-hits style of *Motown Suite* had none of the daring or depth of *Deuce Coupe*.

Further, I was a bit insulted, even as a white person, by the almost total disregard for the type of dancing that was prevalent when this music was popular. The piece definitely aimed for the “take you back to the 60s schoolyard” feel, but then asked one to believe that schoolyard kids could (or would) do flying leaps and twirls, and all manner of other modern dance moves. It was a bit like watching *West Side Story* with the sound off and a Marvin Gaye / Diana Ross CD playing in the background. There was, I felt, a severe disconnect between the music and the movement.

It seemed that choreographer Donald Byrd had tried to cover for this disconnect by staging a series of narrative scenes that followed the texts of the songs fairly directly, and at times, endearingly. Most were vignettes about the stereotypes of high school love, often the themes of motown hits, to be sure.

But in the end, I felt that I would have better enjoyed a full-on Broadway review. Aside from a few excellent solos, the dancing involved a lot of posturing and running around, and I found myself many times closing my eyes and enjoying the music more than the dance, or else more interested in the disco ball than in the choreography beneath it.