

Darkest Before Dawn

The Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble at Charter Oak

Darkland/Dawn: Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble. Performed at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, Hartford, Nov. 16.

Darkness and light have always wrestled each other in choreographer Judy Dworin's full-length works, with their compelling visions of social and personal transformation. Her performance ensemble, moving theatrically from "Darkland" to "Dawn" in two halves of a program of shorter works at Charter Oak Cultural Center this past weekend, was again impressive, conjuring so much with so few (six dancers and a saxophonist). Yet despite the balanced title, the glow of dawn was fainter and less convincing than darkness' hold.

Where Dworin's larger ensemble works—including "Lighthouse" and "Distant Voices Coming Near," performed recently in Bulgaria—have been highly personal visions of social transformation, the smaller works seemed to encapsulate reality with all its tragic flaws. Of this performance's optimistic duets (the "Dawn" half of the program), the most striking were bounded by seductive madness, or satiric self-disintegration: in the "Darkland" duets and quartet, metaphors resonated mass-destruction.

"Tub," one of several evening premieres, was visually and aurally haunting. In a translucent bathtub—filled, like a Tiffany lamp, with honey-gold light—Dworin enacted a somnambulant solo, accompanied by the fascinating, destructive, hushed voice-over of Cynthia Macdonald's text ("Two Brothers in a Field of Absence").

The narrative describes the construction and secret consumption of a straw woman for the sexual pleasure of men who drink beer, resting on her belly. It was painful in the complicity demanded (of straining to decipher the whisper), and in its evocation of oppressive, classical agrarian fertility rites. The movement—broad, slow and jerky arm gestures, curls, extensions, rolls and balancing in and on the tub—tended toward the static, subordinate to the lapping water and text spoken by Dworin. Dedicated "in loving memory of my dear friend Lulu," this Ophelia-like siren-song could only be called "Dawn" in its promise of tragic deliverance. Brave and wrenching, it touched the taboo interior landscape of shimmering madness.

In a more ironic vein, "Lulu and the Moon," first seen last year, was a humorous indictment of unequal sex and power roles as Lulu (Dworin) and her

lover (Jim Martin) enacted, vignette-style, their first passionate encounter, humorously awkward courtship, and her subsequent banal subjugation (at the end of a long leash, still in peach satin, head resting on his lap) as the object of his cooled affections. The movement was sketchy, the setting palpable, propelled by imaginative "moonlighting" of faces (with head-worn lamps). An unexpected denouement (the moon he covets falls into her outstretched hands) combined satiric revenge and discomfiting hysteria.

In "Moments," a second premiere, Orio Duckstein and Lisa Matias Ser-rambana executed a series of self-con-

marial dance in an ingeniously enlarged web (designed by Anguss Moss). The manipulated lattice rose and fell to accommodate their skittering evasions, vise-leg holds, and death embraces.

"Again," a variation on this theme, with Gersten releasing backwards across space on a taut line, with wonderfully sustained jerkiness, began to recreate the web but broke off prematurely. "End," an intense and startling duet, slowly revealed itself as a coupling not of lovers but of enfeebled cannibals.



Judy Dworin devours her own limbs in "End".

tained solos culminating in a cleverly intersecting duet. The water imagery here was lighter: a reflecting pond, the refreshing gurgle of a stream. Deft sidestepping on chairs, and stepping together was the prelude to a mesmerizing sequence of lateral rolls by Ser-rambana, as invariable as the changing tides, with Duckstein in the fascinating counterpoint in this unconventional fugue. He first rolled with her, then butted her with his head, now crawling, now on his knees, now arching over or bridging in a backbend, in more stark variations on a simple theme than one dreamed possible.

"Darkland"—the four short new works which comprised the first half of the program—was more movement-charged, if imbued with a bleaker vision. "Inspired by the wars of our times," it elaborated three metaphors of destruction with considerable originality. "Web" had able spiders (Kelly James and Orion Duckstein) enacting a

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