The sound and the fury

Remy Charlip and Margaret Jenkins forge street anger and creative tension into "All the Rage"

By Katia Noyes

I T’S THE SECOND REHEARSAL WITH AN ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY OF STREET STRAYS. CHOREOGRAPHER REMY CHARLIP IS ENTHUSIASTIC. REMEMBER, he tells the group, the night of the Stonewall riots. "We were all just so excited — get out and do it!" she screams at them to raise their arms and shout their state.\n
A young man, wearing a headband, yells "Free the press!" from a mixed group of straight and gay people, translated into theater. Strange, but wonderful. The protest chants have become a theatrical resource and are moving into the script.\n
"I can't sleep. I'm so excited about this," says Charlip after rehearsal. He's choreographing a specific piece of music, written by composer Bob Ostergard, All the Rage, to be performed this week at Center for the Arts. Like many music/arts events, it represents a fresh mixture of viewpoints and conceptual sources. All the Rage is short, as best I can tell, when Kronos Quartet commissioned Bob Ostergard to compose a score, and then asked choreographer Margaret Jenkins if she was interested in using the music of a shared Center for the Arts concert. Jenkins and her associates at artistic director Ellen Kopp had heard All the Rage when visiting the East Coast, and were thrilled with the idea.\n
Premiered by Kronos at Lincoln Center in 1995, Ostergard's string quartet is an emotionally sweeping, transformative piece of music that uses the sounds of a recorder not as its thematic and structural basis. Ostergard took the sounds of the street protests in San Francisco after the Stonewall riots in 1969 — shout slogans, whistles, screams, sirens — and scored a string quartet to duplicate the tempos and pitches. To add a personal aside, he has also used his own poems, Miles to write an accompanying text. (Originally, Ostergard wanted the words to be written by AIDS activists, artists, and writer David Wojnarowicz, but his illness, and eventual death, made this impossible. The result is a music-theatrical piece which is strange given a piece about gay rage, yet the music is the basis of the performance, which is the desperation that people move to violence.\n
All the Rage is a perfect piece to immerse a community larger than myself and larger than my company, says Margaret Jenkins. To celebrate the Jenkins Dance Company's 20th anniversary, Jenkins and Kopp decided to recruit a large chorus of professional performers and to use one voice language as a choreographic tool. In that sense, it invites into the process Chuck, who had worked with the National Theater of the Deaf, organized gay community events and lead large groups in his teaching workshops.\n
"We're a wonderful group. They're willing and eager. They're a versatile group who received the recipe (Jenkins) so organized. I can just go in and do that and go and do what I want. Then Ellie Kopp yells at the group and gets them to do it. It's all about. Two weeks later at a late evening, Charlip yells, 'I couldn't sleep Monday. It's been a hard week. I got stuck.' Like any good relationship, a successful artistic collaboration brings up the group's unique strengths to the fore. The energy evolves from these differences, and the tension. 'We see things so differently,' says Charlip. 'For example, someone in rehearsal asked, 'What would be the feeling of this section?'\n
I was the feeling of something else.' Charlip, on the other hand, feels "it's best to just do the movement and the rest will take care of itself. I would say. 'It's best to do it with feeling and the rest will follow'.\n
Questions of how to keep performers motivated — and the premium on the work itself — always arise when artists co-direct a performance. 'Marie wants the group to express unusual rage, Charlip says. I keep saying no, this is a very specific rage. I don't want heterosexist couples (in the choreography). There's enough of them around. This is about gay rage.\n
As two straight women, did Jenkins and Kopp feel any hesitation producing a piece about gay rage? 'After a lot of dialogue with each other,' says Jenkins, 'we felt that they were continuously within our emotionally honest right to make a piece that spoke to this community we feel completely committed to.'\n
Kopp describes how moving it was to hear Ostergard's music away from the context in which it was composed, and to realize how unique San Francisco is with its ever-present gay influence. "All the Rage is so much about who we live and the people we live with," says Kopp. "I don't think there are many places like San Francisco where gay culture is so much of what people talk about."\n
The rage is a departure for Jenkins, because it is the one remotely different. "When I heard the music, I felt that it spoke to the community we are all part of in America in this country", says the call. "All we have taken, although it's actually an emotional exploration of queer rage. The 16-minute CD single is dedicated to Kronos' two New York artists, John Ier and Kevin, who have AIDS. Proceeds benefit AIDS.\n
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