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Dance Repertory Theatre

April 30 - May 2. 1976

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A premiere performance of Anna Nassif's "American Suite: Seven Intermedia Pieces" with an original score by new music composer Yehuda Yannay of Milwaukee, climaxed a busy program of dances performed at the University of Wisconsin Madison from April 30 thru May 2.

"American Suite", the most ambitious of these performances, is a bicentennial work that presents an episodic panorama of American history. Corresponding to the abstract, rhythmically-oriented score are seven dances depicting Indians, a revolutionary figure, an immigrant, a Hollywood love triangle, a pop culture scene, patriotism and war. The opening scene shows twelve dancers representing American Indians. They wear masks decorated after Northwest Indian designs and move in a ritual-like procession around the stage and into the audience. First they move in silence, then to the rhythm of stamping feet and finally to the ritual music of the score. They establish a historic context for the remainder of the work.

The next scene presents a single revolutionary figure, possibly Washington. Dancing this role, Al Wiltz moves across the stage slowly hut with a look of determined hope as he symbolizes the forming of the nation.

Elizabeth Walton appears in a native East Indian costume and signifies the immigrant contribution to America. Her movements

suggest the East Indian influences on American dance and reflect the choreographer's attraction to Eastern movement forms. Although the intent of the choreographer is clear, I found this dance strangely out of place.

The most successful episode is a love triangle that takes off on the romantic Hollywood films of the forties. The music is actually a collage taken from film scores of the forties. This dance, performed by Al and Nancy Wiltz and Elizabeth Walton, borrows the suave and gliding movements of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, but includes a hint of the social violence concealed by their polished image. The dance is especially well-staged and evokes an intended humorous response from the audience.

The episodes that follow, images of pop culture, patriotism and war, carry on the theme of American life. A display of flags is visually noteworthy. The work tapers off and ends with a lyrical section that follows a simple melody with beats that change in the sound spectrum. Once again the ritual quality of the dance emerges in the final episode as a priestess figure, danced by Ms. Nassif, stands invariant and anticipates the future.

"American Suite" is a complex work with many interesting possibilities and problems. The problem of integrating an essentially sparse musical style with a richly lyrical choreographic style represents a challenge which was, on the whole, successfully realized. There were difficulties, however, when the choreography remained underdeveloped for the amount of time allotted. For example, in the opening Indian episode, there was too little variety in movement for the length of time. A similar problem existed in the pop culture scene.

To be successful, the piece must also solve the problem of relating the choreography to the historic themes of the past two hundred years. Here the problem is one of maintaining the right balance of narrative and abstraction. The piece attempts to tell the story of America and of American dance, but it must simultaneously retain some distance as a form of artistic symbolism. A major problem emerges because the choreographer attempts to present a highly narrative statement in the vocabulary of modern dance; a vocabulary which is essentially an abstract and often inarticulate language. To solve this problem, Ms. Nassif uses highly narrative movement which appears childish, undisciplined, and overly literal. All of this appears

very strange to eyes that are accustomed to seeing the recent abstract forms of American modern dance.

The results of this attempt are mixed. From the very beginning the literal character of the movement undermined the credibility of the attempt. But the narrative simplicity of the movement provided a natural solution to the need for historic narrative, and it represented an ingenious solution to the problem of matching Nassif's lyrical choreographic style to the sparse music of Yannay.

The experiment of "American Suite" may not have been entirely successful, but the possible uses of narrative movement in American dance is a problem worthy of further choreographic exploration. The "American Suite" was also performed in Boston at the American Dance Guild Conference, "Dance into the Future: Trends, Resources and Environments".



The "American Experiment" program also included works of visiting artists Katherine Litz and Dick Jones. Ms. Litz, who has taken numerous roles in American dance (member of the Humphrey

Weidman Company, a Broadway performer, etc.), danced in her own solo pieces, "The Fall of the Leaf" and "The Glyph". These works showed her in excellent form -- a professional and an entertainer. Her whimsical character sketches leave a lasting image and reveal hints of her richly varied dance career.

Dick Jones performed "11,079 Days", a character study which used baby photographs and other props to provide a biographical sketch -- perhaps of his own. Jones' images are uncluttered and convey a lasting sensitivity.

The remaining works on the program included: Waring's "A New Life", danced by Elizabeth Walton who is a former member of the Paul Taylor Company; Nassif's "Duet from Tryptich", danced by the Wiltzes; Nassif's "I Pity the Poor Immigrant", danced by Phillis Sanfilippo and Bob Krolnik; and Litz's "Planes of Tolerance", which was performed by the UW Dance Repertory Company.

--Curtis L. Carter