



An '80s Darling,
Here and Now,
And Home Again

Clifton Brown and
Dwana Adiaha
Smallwood
performing Karole
Armitage's
"Gamelan
Gardens."

IN high heels and a short strapless dress made of artfully assembled alternating strips of black and transparent fabrics, Karole Armitage took a bow on the stage of City Center after the recent premiere of her “Gamelan Gardens,” created for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. With her long, lean frame and cropped blond hair, she still looked like the young choreographer who both shocked and enthralled New York audiences in the late 1970s and early '80s with high-voltage, punk-influenced dances like “Do We Could” and “Drastic Classicism.”

But more than two decades have passed, and Ms. Armitage, now 53, after a long stretch in Europe, is once again a relative newcomer, a stranger to a large segment of local audiences. To those who remember or have read about the new era that her early choreography seemed to promise, however, she is a prodigal daughter.

“For more than 20 years, since Balanchine’s death, people have been waiting for someone to carry on his project,” Joan Acocella wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2004, reviewing a new work by Ms. Armitage at the Joyce Theater in New York. “Armitage seems to be trying to do so. She should come home, and stay.”

That’s a lot of pressure on an artist, but “my own ambition about what I’m trying to do,” Ms. Armitage said the day after the “Gamelan Gardens” premiere, “has always exerted way more pressure than anyone else could.” That ambition has, she added, remained the same since the early days of her career: “To take classical thinking about technique and form, and bring to it the way we are thinking and experiencing things now.”

In the 1980s she was something of a downtown “It” girl, creating her own high-decibel pieces, choreographing for Madonna and Mi-

chael Jackson on the side, and forming part of an artistic set that included Jeff Koons and David Salle, with whom she had a long relationship. The title “Drastic Classicism” summed up her approach in those years: take the rigor and integrity of expression inherent in classical dance, and push it — hard — into the contemporary world. In the '80s that meant pairing her jagged bursts of formal ballet steps with eardrum-challenging rock music and anarchic set and costume designs by Charles Atlas.

Critics and the downtown audience loved her radical style and irreverent playfulness. “It was all great fun and thought provoking, like a cerebral Halloween party,” Anna Kisselgoff wrote, reviewing “Drastic Classicism” in *The New York Times* in 1981.

Ms. Armitage grew up in Lawrence, Kan., and trained at the North Carolina School of the Arts and at School of American Ballet summer sessions. Her first job, at 17, was with the Balanchine-affiliated Geneva Ballet, but she left after a year, dissatisfied with what she called “the ballet mentality.”

“I loved dancing the contemporary Balanchine pieces, like ‘Agon,’” she said, “but I felt like a bit of an impostor in the ‘Ballet Imperial’ things.” A friend introduced her to Merce Cunningham, and she returned to New York to take classes at the Cunningham studios. “I had never even seen modern dance until then,” she said. “It was a different era: we were literally forbidden to take modern dance class at school. We never even saw those students. I think they were in the basement.”

Mr. Cunningham invited Ms. Armitage to join his company, subsequently creating several important roles for her. After five years, however, she felt the same restlessness she had experienced in Geneva. “I wanted something more of the time, more contemporary,” she said. “It was the rule of no: no virtuosity, no costumes, no sce-

nery. I felt like it was time to say yes, to reintroduce passion and relationships and emotion to dance. So I just made a piece. I had no plans.”

The success of her early works, created while she was still performing with the Cunningham company, led to offers from France, where she choreographed several pieces for her own group of dancers (among them Michael Clark, a British dancer who was later to become fairly famous as a choreographer prone to excess both on and off stage). Ms. Armitage was also invited to choreograph for the Paris Opera Ballet and American Ballet Theater. By the end of the decade she had tired of trying to sustain her own company while commuting between continents.

“I was very young, and I was trying to dance, do the administration of the company and choreograph all at the same time, and I felt like I was doing everything badly,” she said. “Then the bottom really fell out of the New York economy in 1989, and so I just took on more and more European projects.” From 1995 to 1999 she directed the MaggioDanza company in Florence, which she describes as “a wonderful adventure.”

After a few more years taking on freelance projects and working as the resident choreographer for the Ballet de Lorraine, in the French city of Nancy, “I felt that I’d reached the end of something,” she said. In flagrant contrast to the scores of dancers and choreographers dreaming of a better, state-subsidized life in Europe, she decided to return to the United States. The turning point, she says, was “Time Is the Echo of an Ax Within a Wood,” a 2004 commission from the Joyce for which she put together a small group of dancers.

“I remembered how much drive New York dancers have,” she said. “You really have to be passionate about your art here, because it’s so undervalued, and that creates a special intensity. Afterwards I thought I should just try to keep

this group together and go on a voyage with them instead of starting over each time.”

Early last year she formed her new company, Armitage Gone! Dance, presenting a new work, “In That Dream That Dogs Me,” at the Duke on West 42nd Street last December. When Judith Jamison, the artistic director of the Ailey company, heard that Ms. Armitage had returned to New York, she immediately approached her.

“I had seen her work ages ago in Europe,” Ms. Jamison said. “I was always fascinated by her dancing. She was always just a little off center, a little quirky, and I liked her style as a person, and her underlying drive. I want my dancers to stretch, to move around in other people’s shoes, and I knew she would do that.”

It might be argued that Ms. Armitage put the Ailey dancers a little too firmly in her own

Karole Armitage returns, her dances still fueled with her characteristic energy.

stylistic shoes in “Gamelan Gardens,” which John Rockwell described as “disappointingly flat” in a review on Monday in *The New York Times*. To absorb the nuances of the intricate, detailed movements that inform much of the piece, the dancers may well need more rehearsal time than is commonly available in a big company.

But for Ms. Armitage each new work back in New York is a chance to connect with the audience and the inspiration closest to her heart. “No one is going to replace Balanchine,” she said. “But I’m happy to be counted among the people trying to do that in their own way. There is a hunger here for work that has something of that beauty, that transcendence, the idea of the ephemeral. I hope I can convey some of that.”