

## DRASTIC CLASSIC

*Karole Armitage at the Joyce.*

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

How nice, in these gray days on the ballet scene, to have Karole Armitage come back to New York, in a classical mood. In the nineteen-eighties, Armitage was a big presence in the downtown dance world. That's when dance caught up with postmodernism in the other arts, and the fact that it did so was due in part to her. She had useful boyfriends—the porno stars Rhys Chatham and David Salle—and they provided her with music and sets. She also collaborated with Charles Atlas and Jeff Koons, and her work was in that vein: hard-edged, double-toned. I remember, one night in 1988, catching up with her in a piece called "Go-Go Ballerina," at a club in the East Village. She came out in a frightening unitard—black, with a hairy black fringe—and pitched herself on top of a heart-shaped, but black leather, chocolate box (by Koons) the size of an automobile. Out of the box came a man in a T-shirt imprinted with a skull and crossbones. She bit his chest. He hauled her around by her thighs. It wasn't much, but it stuck in your head.

Armitage's work was more than edge, however. It was also classical ballet, the technique in which she had been trained. In 1985, she presented a long pas de deux for herself and Joseph Lennon, an excellent dancer who also looked as though he might own a motorcycle. He wore a black leather skirt; she wore five-inch spike heels, with which, repeatedly, she grazed his head. One of them, you figured, was going to get killed before the night was out. But, instead, this cold transaction slowly became more intimate, questioning ("If I try this, will you help me?"), and the means was classical partnering: he catching her, she holding on to him, as her long, strong legs inscribed in the air their advanced mathematics. (The original title of the piece was " $-p = dH/dq$ ." Probably at the behest of a press agent, it was later renamed "The Watteau

Duets.") This was a time when feminists were saying that classical ballet, by its very nature, demeaned women. The woman was held, she was lifted; ergo, she was a plaything. Armitage showed the opposite.

And she went further. Ballet is very crotchety. Apart from gymnastics, it is the only job in which a female is allowed to make public use of the structures between her legs as an element of design. This may be one reason that so many girls want to go into ballet: they can use their whole bodies, just like men, and nobody makes rude comments. Indeed, no one comments at all. The Sugar Plum Fairy may turn, in supported arabesque, and show her full lower anatomy to four thousand opera-house patrons, and nobody says a word. Armitage did say a word, or her work did. She took the pelvic action of the ballerina and pushed it further. Those legs were always open. She thereby extended ballet technique and got herself a reputation.

It wasn't always a good reputation. The glossy magazines loved Armitage—"the punk princess of the downtown scene," *Vanity Fair* called her—and a lot of thinking people admired her, but the daily critics tended to see her as a matter of fashion rather than of art. "A cultural con job," Clive Barnes, of the *Post*, called a piece that Armitage made for American Ballet Theatre in 1985. "Little talent, much pretension," the *Times*' Anna Kisselgoff said of another piece. Such reviews did not help her career, but a bigger problem was that the look of her work was so trendy, and that the trend—the eighties, Soho style—was passing. There were other discouragements, too. It is very hard to run a small pickup company such as she had in those years. She needed to be working for a big company, but by the late eighties most classical troupes in America were too stodgy to hire her. Her solution was to go to Europe, where there were a lot

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of well-funded opera-house companies eager to snag a New York punk princess. Occasionally, in the past fifteen years, she has brought her European creations back to New York. Some of them have been terrible—for example, "The Predators' Ball," a 1996 ballet about Michael Milken, with people in business suits yelling, "Buy! Sell!" and doing disco dances. And some of the work was beautiful: ballet pushed into new realms of tone and meaning.

"Time Is the Echo of an Axe Within a Wood," the dance that she showed in her season at the Joyce earlier this month, is in the latter category. The set, by Salle, is a knockout: a curtain of silver beads enclosing the three sides of the stage, making it look both numinous

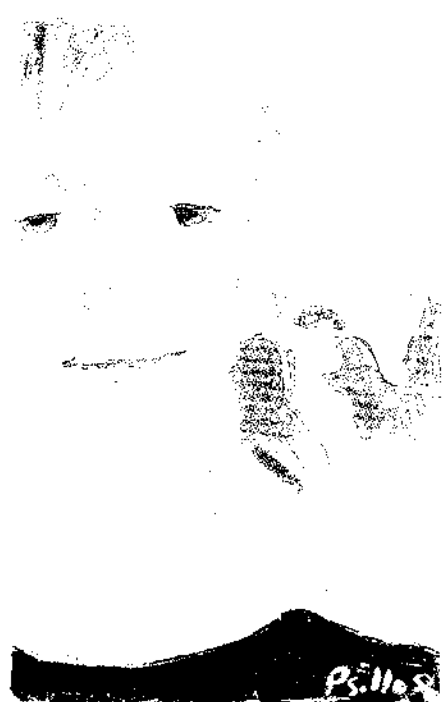
and bleak. Against this backdrop, as the piece opens, we see a dancer, Megumi Eda, in a gold leotard (costumes by Peter Speliopoulos), with her back to us and her rear end jutting out. Typical Armitage, you think: sex, glamour, in-your-face. But soon Eda's rear isn't just in your face. It's in your mind. Her legs are bare: we feel the body's innocence, nakedness. Yet the leotard is taut, metallic, gleaming. So these buttocks become a poignant image—two golden globes, moving in the darkness, telling us that flesh is armored, but still vulnerable. Again and again in the piece, Eda reappears

in this position—the theme of the show, I think.

In between, what we get is largely duets, with, as usual, much splay-legged action for the women. At one point, Theresa Ruth Howard crossed the entire diagonal of the stage in three huge grands jetés, with her partner running to keep up with her. It was like having a javelin thrown at you. Elsewhere, Cheryl Sladkin, in a duet with Brian Chung, seemed to ride him like a piece of gym equipment. Then she unfolded against his side in a massive extension of the leg—not the supposedly spectacular "six o'clock" but six-ten. Then she folded back into him, disappearing, almost, into his body's spaces. Like many of the couples in the piece, these two exited in separate directions once their agon was over. "I'm trying to convey the uncertainty and contradictions in the human condition," Armitage recently told the *Times*. Anyone could say that, and many have, but Armitage actually did it.

The eighties weren't altogether forgotten in "Time Is the Echo." In one ill-advised section near the end, Armitage brought on three club-dance voguers, who poked their arms out and stuck their legs behind their ears and broke the mood. At the same time, an Indian dancer appeared and did what looked like improvisation. But pretty soon these people went away, and the gladiators of love returned.

Armitage once entitled a piece "Drastic Classicism." That is an apt phrase to describe what George Balanchine practiced: the conjuring of extreme and secret states of the soul via ballet alone, with its steps serving as "open symbols," nonspecific but suggestive. Armitage has always had Balanchine on her mind. The company where she started out as a dancer, Geneva's Ballet du Grand Théâtre, had a Balanchine-heavy repertory, and a veteran Balanchine dancer, Patricia Neary, as its director. Armitage often speaks of Balanchine in interviews, and I think his "leotard" ballets were the primary inspiration for her choreography. For more than twenty years, since Balanchine's death, people have been yearning for someone to carry on his project and thus create the future of American ballet, of which he is, almost totally, the past. Armitage seems to be trying to do so. She should come home, and stay. ♦



Armitage pushes ballet into new realms.

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