

Cut Crystal

Setting classicism on edge (with love)

by **Deborah Jowitt**

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Armitage Gone! Dance
Joyce Theater
February 6 through 11

Mei-Hua Wang and William Isaac in the world premiere of Karole Armitage's *Ligeti Essays*. Photograph by Richard Termine

What does it mean to use the words "tender astringency" in relation to Karole Armitage's newest work, *Ligeti Essays*? It's a quality that emanates in part from the ways in which her choreography intersects with a variety of pieces by the late Gyorgy Ligeti (song cycles, a concerto, and music for solo pieces). Like Armitage, Ligeti sends classicism off on startling tangents. He knots strings of notes and untangles them into a silence that may be pierced by a single voice. She gives her remarkable dancers passages of pristine complexity and sudden simplicity. Amid the flash of limbs, a dancer will unexpectedly lay his head on his partner's shoulder.

Armitage's frequent collaborator, artist David Salle, has created a wintry landscape—a gray world defined by shielded fluorescent light tubes laid along the sides and back of the stage and decorated by a bare white tree. Clifton



Dance

Taylor's lighting enhances the chill, and the dancers wear handsome black outfits by Peter Speliopoulos. Many of the pieces of music are short. When one ends, the dancers involved walk matter-of-factly offstage. The lights go out. When they come up again, the dancers for the next section are usually in place. Midway through the work, stars begin to appear on the dark backdrop, and by the end, it's thick with glittering points.

The dancing makes me think of thin ice—not just because it can be risky, but because it often seems on the verge of thawing. Its shifts are as piercing as those in the music. As the first duet for Ryan Kelly and Frances Chiaverini winds down, a tenor voice gives way to babble and silence. A soprano sounds atypically sour and shrewish. Not all the dancing is conventionally beautiful either. William Isaac performs a lyrical solo voyage, but Theresa Ruth Howard pliés with the point of her chin stuck to Leonides D. Arpon's shoulder. The splendid dancers (Kelly, Chiaverini, Howard, Arpon, Isaac, Scott Rink, Mei-Hua Wang, and Masayo Yamguchi) merge in unexpected ways in many glittering little "essays"—duets, trios, and quartets. When they cluster together, they writhe gently, forming pairs within the molecular structure. Alone, they experiment with odd angles. But as in choreography by Merce Cunningham (Armitage danced in his company from 1976 to 1981), their legs are stretched and articulate, probing and slashing the space. In a trio for Chiaverini, Arpon, and Mathew Branham, tall Chiaverini swings a leg startlingly over the shorter men's heads as the three twist and grapple.

I'm tempted to call the sections of Ligeti Essays vignettes, perhaps because Armitage has built cracklings of heat into the cool storyless formality, and vestiges of emotion mark or shape some of the gestures. In the surprising ending, Megumi Eda enters with a lantern and touches each of the others before joining their last pattern. She's dressed in the same little belted black tunic as the other women, but appears to be about eight months pregnant. Maybe spring is about to come.

Armitage also created a mischievous little program opener in which Eda, wearing a white party dress, teases and flirts with a giant inflatable pig designed by Jeff Koons. The pig is sufficiently aroused to rock and wiggle. The evening closes on a more serious note, with a revised section of Armitage's *Time is the Echo of an Axe within a Wood*, set to music by Bela Bartok. Made in 2004, this powerful piece confirmed a new maturity in Armitage's work, releasing it from the punk label attached to her early choreography and the pop imagery of some more recent pieces. It's dazzling.