

DanceBeat

Deborah Jowitt on bodies in motion

Going with the Flow

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Lar Lubovitch's *Men's Stories: A Concerto in Ruin*. Photo: Chris Roesing

In 2000, I saw Lar Lubovitch's *Men's Stories: A Concerto in Ruin* at the Angel Orensanz Center on the Lower East Side. The former synagogue with its dark wood paneling, high blue vault of a ceiling, and stained glass windows gave the nine superb dancers who rushed in and out of it a slightly mystical aura—as if they'd channeled the ghosts of rabbinical students maddened by their studies. The dance's title refers to the fact that much of the music in Scott Marshall's sound collage for the piece is Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 (the "Emperor"), which is submerged, trampled on, and overridden by scraps from such diverse sources as a 1950s-vintage father-son chat about sex and high voices chanting in Latin, along with cataclysmic cacophony. In the ruined splendor of the Orensanz, Beethoven reared a ruined head.

Resurrected in 2011 in the pristine intimacy of the Baryshnikov Art Center's Howard Gilman Performance Space (November 9 through 20), *Men's Stories* offers a different cast of nine brilliant performers as images from an album of swirling memories—some of them perhaps dredged from nights spent reading novels by Alexandre Dumas. The dancers seem less summoned-up denizens of a historic building than figures printed onto a featureless space.

In the beginning, they wear all-black formal attire by Ann Hould-Ward—trousers, black shirts, ties, and vests, plus cutaways with white-edged lapels (later, they discard the coats, ties, and vests to dance with rolled-up shirt-sleeves). Close to them though we are, Clifton Taylor's skillful lighting can keep some men distanced in the shadows—perhaps frozen in mid-gesture—when others emerge into brightness. They're elegant, these fellows—a secret confederacy or members of an exclusive men's club. They bow; they expostulate silently. A duel may be imminent. A tableau suggests a fallen soldier. Clifton Brown, the magnificent former Ailey dancer, stalks arrogantly among them.

But nothing stays the same for long. The nine (Attila Joey Csiki, Jason McDole, Jonathan A. Alsberry, Brown, Reed Luplau, Brian McGinnis, Carlos Lopez, Nathan Madden, and Milan Misko) rush on like a flock of swans, circle the space, or drop to the floor and flaunt their strength in unity;

from time to time, the clusters disgorge soloists. Csiki is wonderfully lavish, almost swooning in his transports of dancing. McDole (the only performer from the original cast) may look unaccountably surly at times, but his richly three-dimensional way of focusing his movement enlivens the space around him. Alsberry's expressive solo leaves him inert and alone on the floor. Nathan Madden goes spectacularly wild. All the dancing is full-bodied, sweeping, and powerful, yet varied in enough ways to keep you engaged.

The end, though, is speculative. The men are back in their tailcoats, resting on the floor. Alsberry walks in with a marionette dressed like the rest of them. The little fellow (maybe two feet high) approaches now one man, now another, wiping a brow, shaking a hand. He gestures to rouse them. Did Beethoven give up? No. Standing in fifth position, they're primed to dance again.



Lar Lubovitch's new *Crisis Variations* (Laura Rutledge aloft). Photo: Paula Lobo

Lubovitch has had—is having—a successful and diverse career. He has made works for companies here and in Europe, choreographed Broadway shows, and created ice dances (including a full-length *Sleeping Beauty* starring Olympic medalists). Dances for skaters suit his aesthetic well. In many of the dances he makes for his own group, he continues to be entranced by flow. He's a master of making movement patterns churn around, assuming new designs that evolve and deteriorate almost before you can grasp them. The dancers who power them are also fluid and flexible—sliding like eels through the interstices and tunnels made by their companions. His BAC season world premiere, *Crisis Variations*, takes this imagery to extremes—perhaps because the seven dancers who perform it appear to be mired in a critical situation. They're desolate, limp, weighted down by some unknown cataclysm, whether external or internal. They don't seem to move of their own free will, but as if powerful forces were pushing and pulling at them. If they explode into the air, blame an inner volcano.

The music is nearly enough to drive them. Yevgeny Sharlat's vivid score (also a world premiere) is based on Franz Liszt's "Transcendental Etudes." Scored for violin, flute, saxophone, double bass, and keyboard, and played live by Le Train Bleu (conductor: Ransom Wilson), its eclectic elements and sonorities abet the complex texture and broken structures of the dance. The terrific performers wear assorted gray, brown, and black practice clothes. Jack Mehler's lighting is often harsh. Wherever these people are, I'm glad I'm not there with them.



Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis in *Crisis Variations*. Photo: Paula Lobo

There's a mating going on amid the turbulence. We've seen Katarzyna Skarpetowska dance briefly alone and with Brian McGinnis—both of them stunning. But after she has left and the others (Nicole Corea, Laura Rutledge, Csiki, Luplau, and McDole) have flopped around in unison as if jolted by a common electric force, they go get her and give her to McGinnis.

The ensuing duet proceeds as a study in collapse. McGinnis drags Skarpetowska for what seems like a long time; he crawls on his hands and knees with her clamped awkwardly onto his back, as inert as a knapsack. Now the others seem as hostile as a pack of dogs, and it's hard to tell what Lubovitch wants us to feel when, under a diagonal beam from above, the roiling horde comes up behind Skarpetowska, makes an opening, and sucks her into it and out of sight. Is this the end of a love affair? The end of her? The end of the world as we know it?

Crisis Variations, like *Men's Stories*, doesn't pretend to a narrative through-line, although the sinuous flow of the choreography may deceive you into thinking otherwise. The new piece suffers from following the richer, more variegated earlier one on Program B of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company's BAC season. Who doesn't thrill to nine major male dancers going at it full throttle in intriguing ways and surviving?