

Ballet Review

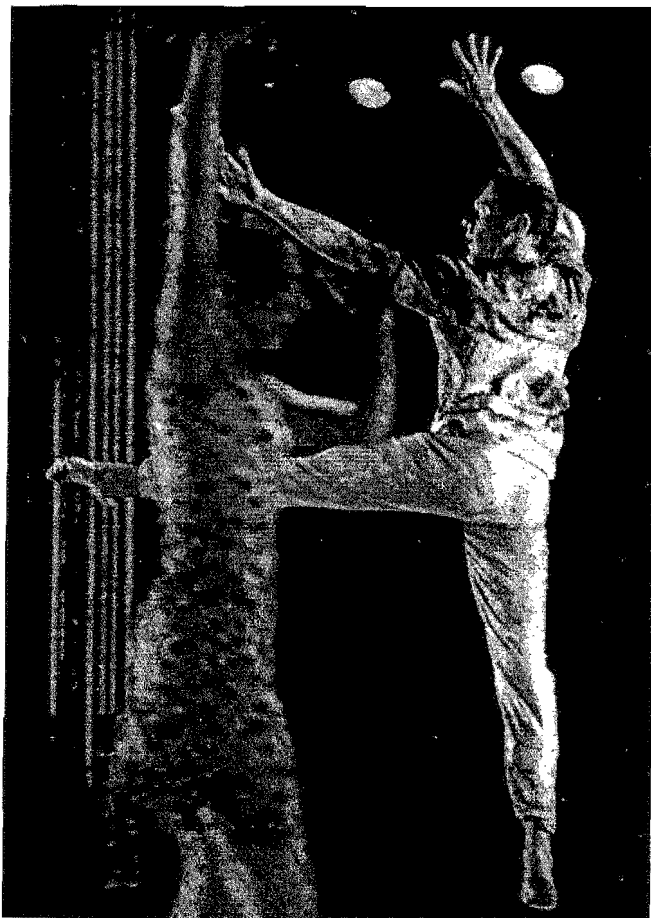
Don Daniels

Leg Men

Neil Greenberg's work for his own company has always been leggy, so much so that when he adds a quasi-balletic plastique and gestural arms, the mix is supercharged. The main fantasy of his theater is carried by the legs: they generate the large and small rhythms that the choreographer organizes into dance works of considerable temporal extent. Earlier, Greenberg depended on a variety of theatrical devices and lots of silence; his most recent work has relied heavily on dance alone and incorporated long passages of musical accompaniment. In *This Is What Happened* (P. S. 122) the Bernard Herrmann excerpts are powerful musical statements. To match them, Greenberg has created dance equivalents to big-screen close-ups, tracking shots, and wide-angle panoramas. Two large observation mirrors (the type you see in bank lobbies) loom on each side of the performance space, like the eyes of God or perhaps Hitchcock's ostensibly Catholic conscience looking down on the tribute. Greenberg even brings off an equivalent to the Hitchcockian "clipped" ending: Cary Grant locking the car door and condemning Claude Rains to death in *Notorious*, Jimmy Stewart standing helplessly atop the bell tower in *Vertigo*.

Greenberg appropriates themes from the

iconography of Hitchcock's films (*The Unknown*, *Loss of Control*, *Fearful Imaginings*, *The Lady of Misrule*), restates them in dance terms, and then uncovers rare paranoias through movement variations. Within the choreographer's medium, we find, there is another but related type of "suspense." We sense here, too, how our "future" is a mental construct superimposed upon recalcitrant reality so that a vulnerable "present" is easily reduced to schema; how memories of the past must be raided to authenticate present obsession, resulting in falsified personal history and tainted social intercourse — familiar themes, but freshly stated. The two women who perform with Greenberg, Justine Lynch and Paige Martin, are full-bodied wonders, able to look like showgirls, femme fatales, or conspicuous victims.



Neil Greenberg in *This Is What Happened*. (Photo: Tom Brazil)

This Is What Happened spirals around the way women are seen as highly untrustworthy in Hitchcock and film noir in general. The female is societal totem: she is big trouble. As in Hitchcock's famous movies, Greenberg can make his women look icily elegant, their upper bodies alert to trespass, chic suppliants before absolutist crime and fashionable punishment. Charles Rosen wrote recently about the surface difficulties of Mallarmé's verse, "The solution to the enigma is on the surface, which itself becomes the treasure as our experience of it grows." In his formalism and in his facture, Greenberg declares a similar classicist's bias. I once asked Edwin Denby if he didn't find Lucinda Childs sometimes willing to sacrifice her performance glamour before the altar of her dance structures. Denby replied, "I suspect it's all that . . . memo-

rization." As we have sometimes painfully learned, much of the formal ambition of post-modern dance has included a willingness to sacrifice surface treasures in the pursuit of a legible rigor.

There are powerful mimetic moments in *This Is What Happened*, especially some quiet, troubled solos for all three dancers or held "shots" as when one of them peers lengthily into a mirror or is transformed suddenly into a choreographic mirror image through movement unison. The dancers change strikingly in appearance during the course of the work: "Something is happening to her" reads one of the supertitles. But Greenberg's primary tool remains dance passages of percussive legwork that here drum both hysterical reaction to suspected threat and the machinery of fate itself.

How much of ballet vocabulary has settled down as accental residue in the language of American modern dance! You can see it in the big battements

and ronds de jambe in Greenberg's idiom, the pas de bourrée covering the stage, the relevés into an extended front attitude and punctuated développés forward. There are grands jetés and sprung sautés in second, "broken" pas de chat and broad chassés. All these ghostly tokens of a classical currency have been drained of their usual balletic content (for one thing, the dancers' step initiations are plusher) and turned toward new expressive ends, as a film director will empty narrative genre conventions and fill them with fresh blood. But watch the classical ghosts gather, feed, and mediate. Greenberg's dance cadences at first are tentative and then very long indeed, as though some unknown tension has found its destined release. No matter the anxiety level, the dance surface remains courtly, cool, antibombastic: Hitchcockian.

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