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Greenberg's Ideas Keep Him on the Move

Dance Review

By CHRIS PASLES
 TIMES STAFF WRITER

Neil Greenberg is a New York choreographer who has grown by divesting himself of more and more of the elements that defined his impressive work.

Two new pieces danced at the Skirball Cultural Center on Thursday showed him relinquishing narrative and cues to interpretation by means of music and slide projections, and focusing upon movement itself. Or rather, upon a specific initiation of movement.

Purification is another way of putting it.

Although Greenberg had been creating works for seven years, it was not until his 1994 "Not-About-AIDS-Dance"—which was precisely about AIDS and its legacy of fear, suffering, death and loss—that he justifiably drew major attention from critics and audiences.

That dance was the first in a trilogy of works about that dreadful affliction, all of which incorporated text and some kind of storytelling amid the choreographer's spiraling, explosive, off-center movement vocabulary.

In "MacGuffin or How Meanings Get Lost (Revisited)," a reworking of a 1987 piece as mostly a solo for Mikhail Baryshnikov (danced to music by Bernard Herrmann at UCLA last June), the visual cues came thick and fast.

Last year's "This Is What Happened," the first of the two pieces seen at Skirball on Thursday, again uses film music by Herrmann but incorporates minimal use of slide projections.

"Sequel," created this year and about half the length of "What Happened," also uses snippets of music by Herrmann, but does away with projections altogether.

Danced by Greenberg, Justine Lynch and Paige Martin, "What Happened" is a film noir-inspired piece, which does not preclude some sly digs at the genre too.

With their movements reflected in miniature in two convex mirrors at the back corners of the stage,



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Dancer-choreographer Neil Greenberg performs in his work "This Is What Happened," one of two pieces presented at the Skirball Center.

the dancers twist and turn in solos, pairs or trios, often observing one another warily, never making contact, and suggesting fragmentary plot events amid bursts of pure activity.

The narrative is vague, although there are many movement and postural invocations of warding off impending danger or reaching out, as Herrmann's film music wells up or, more often, in silence. The music easily colors the movement, and the difference between seeing it with or without music is part of Greenberg's interest.

Unfortunately, the floor of the outdoor stage at the Skirball Center grew damp and risky in the night air, although there hadn't been any problem when fog rolled in during rehearsal the night before, according to a Skirball spokesperson.

Greenberg slipped and recovered, but the piece was stopped midway through so that the stage could be wiped down. Even so, Greenberg slipped two more times and was understandably cautious in one of his sequence repetitions.

That disruption, plus the airy openness of the outdoor venue, dissipated intended dramatic tensions of the work and made its assessment problematic. Even so, it was easy to focus on the dancers'

skillful use of weight, balance and line.

"Sequel," in which Antonio Ramos joined Greenberg, Lynch and Martin, incorporates now-familiar Greenberg poses and plasticity, as well as the thematic concerns they evoke.

But the new work seems to depend or focus more fundamentally upon what can be called "release" technique, or a letting-go in initiating movement.

A small unfolding of one dancer's fingers, for instance, set off a wrist and arm rotation that could remain isolated and observed, or could carry momentum through the whole body and beyond to the other dancers.

Thus the focus and the stage space could appear to expand and contract in wondrous fluidity.

In retrospect, it was clear that this technique had been present in "What Happened" and probably in earlier Greenberg works. But here it occupied a more central position.

At times, it seemed essentially exploratory, as if Greenberg were assembling the elements of language rather than writing a poem, much less a novel. Still, it often took flight, adding a new element of lyricism—even romanticism—to the choreographer's palette.