

# The Boston Globe

DANCE REVIEW

## Armitage brings a steely edge

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | August 5, 2006

BECKET -- Talk about a storied past: Karole Armitage has danced for George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham, worked for the celebrated film team of Merchant and Ivory, and choreographed music videos for Madonna and Michael Jackson. Once dubbed "the punk ballerina" for her postmodern edginess, she has been directing operas and ballets throughout Europe for most of the past 15 years.

Somehow, all that eclectic, globe-trotting experience feeds into the choreography Armitage now creates for her own company. While her work is grounded in the clarity and line of ballet, she often throws the vocabulary into warp drive, with movement phrases powered by a fluid muscularity. Her dancers are steely technicians with lightning reflexes, hyperextended and overrotated legs. Contortions and poses teeter on the edge of balance, and dancers are just as prone to roll to the floor as whip out a series of elegant turns.

At Jacob's Pillow this week, Armitage is presenting excerpts from two of her most recent works. "Time is the echo of an axe within a wood," inspired by a Philip Larkin poem, was represented by an excerpt set to Bartok's brilliant 20th-century classic "Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta."

Framed on three sides by David Salle's clear-bead curtains, dancers enter and exit without ceremony, reflecting the fluidity of what the program notes call "dream-, memory-, and clock-time." The highlight is a stunning, delicately animalistic solo by Megumi Eda that evolves into an exquisite duet with William Isaac. He emerges as a dream magician, guiding, protecting, and molding her moves. In the score's fast movements, the full ensemble dances with vigor, stomping, thrusting, flailing, clapping, and kicking as they create arresting floor patterns.

"In this dream that dogs me," set to a quirky original score by frequent collaborator Annie Gosfield, is far subtler and less cohesive. Gosfield's music, mostly for cello, prepared piano, electronics, and percussion, lends an exotic, slightly Asian feel that works well with Armitage's idea of a dance inspired by Asian calligraphy. But it heightens the fractured structure, as both music and movement unfold in fits and starts. Bursts of activity erupt from stillness or from slow, luxurious stretches seldom woven with connective thread.

In the gamelike, methodical opening, Isaac, Leonides D. Arpon, and Brian Carey Chung partner the sinuous Theresa Ruth Howard through a series of vignettes. With calculated coolness, a slap to the rear provokes a fall to the floor. A kick to the thigh propels a turn. A bump of the hip sets off a skitter across the floor.

As the work evolves, some vulnerability creeps in. A duet between Arpon and Eda is almost playful; by the end, there is a trace of real tenderness. Throughout, glimpses of calligraphy's brushwork and iconography seem to inform the movements, especially those of the tiny, quicksilver Arpon, moving so lightly his arms seem to float on currents of air.