

American Dance Festival

N.C. Dance Theatre shows varied talents

by Beth Lueck
Dance Critic

The American Dance Festival could hardly be held at Duke University without featuring the state's own North Carolina Dance Theater, now in its seventh year. This past Friday evening the troupe performed a selection from its repertoire of largely modern dance pieces to a highly receptive and enthusiastic audience.

"The Grey Goose of Silence," a ballet conceived especially for North Carolina Dance Theater by internationally known Canadian choreographer Norbert Vesak,

was clearly the audience's favorite, and perhaps appropriately so. Taking an Appalachian folktale as its theme, the ballet dramatizes in dance the story of a young woman, married to an old, cruel man, who falls in love with a blind boy. More than this, "The Grey Goose" attempts to evoke the oppressive silence and conformity seen as stifling the Appalachian community. The number combines elements of classical, modern, jazz, and folk dance, using the latter to develop the Appalachian theme with touches of clog-type dancing.

The strong, inspired dancing of Svea Eklof and Michel Rahn dominated the number. Miss Eklof performed admirably in a highly demanding role as the young wife, executing some of the more difficult choreography faultlessly and fluidly. Unfortunately, her partner through much of the piece, Edward Campbell, portraying her sadistic husband, was not at all equal to her performance; he seemed bored and lifeless, as if he were merely walking through the role at a rehearsal. Miss Eklof deserves much better partnering to match her fine dancing ability. She found a more technically accomplished partner in Michel Rahn, who danced the part of her young lover. Both gave strong performances which were largely responsible for the ballet's success, for the rest of the company did not appear to be working very hard to support them.

The evening opened with a Balanchine ballet, "Allegro Brillante," set to the music of Tchaikovsky's third piano concerto. One can't go wrong with Balanchine, at least with his simpler, classically styled ballets, and the North Carolina company fared pretty well. The number began a bit roughly, with most of the dancers either nervous or unsure of

themselves, but as the music gathered momentum, so did the company, and the piece closed with the cast in good form and apparently more confident. Most of the partnering in this number was shaky, as it was throughout the evening.

"Sun Flowers", choreographed by Anthony Tudor, featured women in white Edwardian dresses flirting with their hoped-for beaux. Although some could enjoy the mood evoked by the costuming and scant plot, the dancing was not outstanding, flawed in part once again by weak partnering.

The mood of the dancers leaped into joyful, confident pleasure in the final number, "Bach: Brandenburg Three," choreographed by Charles Czarny several years ago for the company. Its clean, muscular choreography nicely suits the company's youthful tenor. The piece is a group of dances in which dancers bounce around like happy acrobats and athletes, enjoying movement and fun for their own

sake. Large, helium-filled balloons and five doors were the only props needed to make for a bit of dead-pan clowning that the audience enjoyed. The unexpected mixing of Bach and balloons revealed Czarny's wild sense of humor, and the company revelled in it.

A program obviously intended to show off the North Carolina Dance Theater's widely varied talents did just that, for they acquitted themselves fairly well as a whole. But unfortunately it also pointed up weaknesses which very much need attention. Lack of confidence, on the one hand, and poor partnering, on the other, combine to weaken the effect of good dance training and a fair acquirement of technical skills. Yet the Dance Theater remains a significant sign of North Carolina's increasingly encouraging response to dance, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic audiences for the American Dance Festival so far this summer.

Performance by Eliot Feld Ballet provides dance a touch of class.

by Gary Parks
Dance Critic

So much praise has been heaped so quickly on choreographer Eliot Feld that people sometimes wonder, "How good is he?"

Artistic backlash is often the result of such enthusiasm: not wishing to be seen jumping on the newest bandwagon, people hang back, distrustful of all the hoopla. But for Feld all that hoopla, and a whole lot more, is deserved. In an age of hokum, Feld is the genuine original.

The Consort (1970), a suite of dances with a late medieval feel, is a good example of Feld's skill at building up a work's coloring throughout its length. The ballet starts with well-bred courtiers performing a strict pavanne; by the finish, peasants drunk with the sensation of their not-yet-civilized strength are in the midst of a debauch. Despite this contrast, or rather because of it, the work is a feverish from beginning to end.

When the courtiers hold center stage, the seething fever is tightly controlled, expressed only by the dagger-like precision of the dancers' steps. By the time the peasants take over, this frenzy has furiously erupted to the surface. The ballet's final image — women being thrown in sexual ecstasy feet-first straight up over their partners' heads,

staying there, and then divebombing back toward another embrace — is enthralling.

Humor is a difficult thing to handle in dance. Some choreographers, constrained by lack of words, play pratfalls and other visual gags for their broad appeal. Clever jokesters like Feld can get laughs with much more subtle effects.

A shepherd, alone on a hilltop, begins to dance wistfully with his crook in *A Footstep of Air* (1977). A gentle smile lights his beatific face. With great care, he propels himself skyward by pushing away the ground with his staff. The audience sits entranced by this vision. Suddenly, the shepherd finds himself absurdly astride the staff, and the eight-foot pole turns from partner to embarrassing appendage. The audience, caught by surprise in Feld's trap of a joke, laughs as much at itself as at the shepherd's awkward pose.

What compounds the humor is that Feld sets the same trap time after time in the piece, and we, the viewers, willingly fall into it every chance we get. A swordfighter, danced by Feld himself, advances on an invisible enemy. As he parries and thrusts his way through the battle we realize that at least 50 per cent of the time he's holding his rapier by the point, brandishing a bobbing handle at his opponent. The audience doesn't believe the rapier's rapid change in direction even as it sees them. But, like always, we've been so captured by Feld's skill, we're ready to accept anything.

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9:15

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4:55
7:20
9:45

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7:00
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