

ELISA MONTE DANCE

March 3, 2011

Watching Elisa Monte's "Treading" being performed on opening-night of Monte's company stint at the [The Joyce Theater](#), one couldn't help but imagine how stunning this duet must have been to those who first beheld it in its 1979 premiere at Marymount Manhattan College. From its use of [Steve Reich's](#) enigmatic, insinuating "Music for Eighteen Musicians" to its intense, rapturously erotic undulations, this pas de deux still packs a wallop and it was, by far, the single piece of the night whose audience reception all but made the theater roof collapse.

Most of the applause was piled in the direction of veteran Ailey dancer Elizabeth Roxas, who despite being above age 50 and going through knee problems that had once gotten bad enough to have almost prematurely ended her career (if not incapacitated her altogether), held up her end of [Monte's](#) vivid colloquy with startling poise and dynamism. Even when she and her partner Matthew Rushing (another audience favorite and former Ailey dancer) came out at the program's conclusion for a curtain call, the audience was still willing and able to detonate explosive gratitude. "Treading" was the highlight, but the rest of the evening offered other, diverse satisfactions.

This 30th anniversary celebration of Monte's company would seem to offer a rangy panoply of the choreographer's modernist explorations. The dual influences of both Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey, for both of whom Monte danced and choreographed, merge in her work with often striking results. The gala performance began with "Tears Rolling", a 1997 work for three dancers representing (as the program notes say) "the varied aspects of one woman's emotional journey." The contrasting figures were embodied by company member Liz Beres and guests Francesca Harper and another remarkable Ailey veteran [Sarita Allen](#).

They each folded and expanded away, around and towards each other in graceful alignment with the allusive, haunting score of Arvo Part's "Fratres." The piece was said to be something of a departure from Monte's customary aggressiveness. If such visits to the lyrical and ruminative are rare for her, she should spend more time to see what other revelations could be found.

"White Dragon" was more typical of Monte's fiery spirit: Seven dancers, including the husband-wife team of Matthew and Tiffany Rea-Fisher as guests, all bare-chested, in varied states of martial artistry. The company dancers – Ingrid Abeleda, Clymene Baugher, Joe Celej, Rachel Holmes and Chalvar Montiero – wielded their respective warrior spirits with unfettered bravado. But it was the pas de deux between the guest couple that somehow placed all the warfare in compact relief.

The second half of the program was taken up with the world premiere of "Vanishing Languages," an anthropological meditation framed by the percussive score of [Kevin James](#) (who led a string orchestra propelled by various rhythmic instruments, both arcane and ancient). Soundtracks of recorded speech – taken, according to the program, from tribal languages at or near extinction – were weaved into the musical background with each of the company's eight dancers embodying a culture struggling for life against history.

One was struck here, as with the other pieces, by the intimate relationship each dancer had with the musical flow. (With modernism, one is more accustomed to music and movement playing more blatant hide-and-seek games.) Clearly, with Monte, there's intellect. But it shares the governing duties with emotions that, though hardly on her sleeve, nonetheless probe with conspicuous force.

By Gene Seymour

EYE ON THE ARTS