

SIGNATURE SERIES – PROGRAM REFLECTIONS

~ Gary Novak ~

GLASS FIGURES

Ma Cong's *Glass Figures* are not brittle. They are simply beautiful dance movements inspired by the music of Philip Glass. I say "simply," but, of course, there is nothing simple about Ma's choreography. One might say, depending on one's tastes, that it is Glass's music that is simple and repetitious. But for that very reason, the mood it creates lends itself easily to balletic interpretation. Balanchine once said that some music is undanceable because it is so engaging that any dancing would be a distraction from it. One might say that *Glass Figures* (or, as I think of them, *Ma Cong Figures*) are a welcome distraction from Glass's repetitions. I would even say that Ma's choreography "saves" Glass's music.

In any case, the symbiosis of moody music and creative choreography produces a very agreeable outcome. Like the Seinfeld sitcom, the ballet is "about nothing." No theme, no message, no story. Or rather, as Balanchine claimed, even story-less ballets have stories if we are not too insistent that they be complete and accountable. A danseur touching the hand of a ballerina is, in Balanchine's book (and mine, and I believe, Ma Cong's), already a story. As Balanchine explains with childlike simplicity, "You see, the real world is not here." The real "real world" is where useless ballet takes us. And the only message is the one John Keats gave us: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

We should not be surprised to find confirmation of this location of the real world by the last choreographer on the program. Kurt Jooss said in 1928: "But the dancer himself . . . experiences the highest human happiness: to rise up out of the pitiful, sorrowful realm of the small, personal quotidian life and to ascend, with body and soul, as a human of flesh and blood, into the heaven of all religions: the eternal fantasy." Whether they tell real world stories about War and Death or celebrate the beauty of eternal fantasy, dance people know where ultimate reality resides.

I was never a dancer, but when I am privileged to attend Tulsa Ballet rehearsals, the smallest fragment of a story about nothing is enough to

transport me to the heaven of all religions - led not by Jooss's Death but by dancers dedicated to beautiful movement. And that is where Ma Cong takes us - but only for a visit - for until our conductor is Death, we must return to pay our bills.

RASSEMBLEMENT

Rassemblement is not the first dance to celebrate opposition to oppression. Aram Khachaturian's *Spartacus* was based on the ancient revolts against Roman slavery. *The Flames of Paris* dealt with the French Revolution. Why, after the eradication of slavery and serfdom, are such dances still of interest? Because they illustrate the precariousness even of established social arrangements. As long as a situation of social injustice does not receive communal opposition, it can come to seem "natural." Prejudice can be a consequence, as well as cause, of injustice and, as sociologist Peter Berger put it, "The most terrible thing that prejudice can do to a human being is to make him tend to become what the prejudiced image of him says he is." *Rassemblement* ("gathering") refers to the communal opposition to slavery expressed in Haitian slave songs and voodoo, which served to unify slaves from various ethnic backgrounds in Africa and to prevent them from becoming in their own eyes what they were in the eyes of those with power.

Unlike *Spartacus* and *The Flames of Paris*, *Rassemblement* does not take us to the point of revolt. But it illustrates the importance of cultural resistance as a prerequisite to social change. So, even though we see the escaped slave recaptured and beaten, distressed slaves supported by gatherings of cultural opposition are not necessarily dispirited slaves. We even see a love duet, the anticipatory nature of which is emphasized by a concluding gunshot. Normal domestic relations will have to await liberation.

But, paradoxically, the oppositional cultures which form the basis of resistance can also come to seem "natural." So, with his sociological insight, Berger correctly explains that the ultimate goal of resistance is not the replacement of an oppressor-

induced belief in black inferiority with black pride but the recognition that "race" (not color, which is real) is nothing but a fiction to begin with. Viewers will enjoy *Rassemblement* most when they see it not as a dutiful multicultural visit to an alien culture but as an expression of the humanity they share. Seemingly distant social issues can assume contemporary significance - as when we consider whether the legacy of slavery should end in "identity politics" or the achievement of full human liberty.

THE GREEN TABLE

When Kurt Jooss visited the Joffrey Ballet in 1967 to supervise the revival of his classic 1932 work *The Green Table*, he described the work as "a sort of religious ceremony" inspired by the medieval "dance of death" (*danse macabre*) in which the figure of Death (danced by Jooss himself in the original) visits people from all walks of life and ushers them to their demise. Death, of course, is busy in wartime - and *The Green Table* is reasonably characterized as an anti-war work because it portrays in eight scenes the suffering war causes - not only to soldiers but the whole social spectrum. It also displays the buffoonery of politicians, jawboning over the green table as war draws ever closer.

But the menacing and formidable figure of Death is not presented as evil but as unexpected. Foolish war enthusiasts expect not death but glory or wealth or power, and *The Green Table* may be viewed as a warning that the only winner in war is Death. But that insight must be supplemented by the "religious ceremony" perspective of the dance of death, which holds that the only winner in everything is death. Only premature death can be eliminated by ending war. So Jooss is not content to express only the suffering of war - which like the suffering of slavery is pretty well understood - but emphasizes that, even in the mass killing of war, death is individual. The mother, who surrenders to Death, is treated compassionately, while Death does not even soil his hands by taking the war profiteer but banishes him to the wailing and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness - accompanied by the fearsome music that introduced Death.

One of the most moving scenes presents the women left behind by war, who have time to reflect

on lost husbands and sons. But the partisan woman in red dress reminds us that death is individual: her participation in war leads to a different death than that of the mother. Women do not enjoy a collective innocence.

We do not see the diplomats die; indeed, we do not see their faces at all behind their masks of irresponsibility. Their return unchanged at the end of the dance may suggest that the anti-war lessons of history have not been learned, but it may also suggest that they are not likely to be learned, making reflection on the dance of death even more important. Jooss saw the clouds of WWII gathering but believed that the war was "bound to happen," and in the last year of his life, he said:

"I am firmly convinced that art should never be political, that art should not dream of altering people's convictions . . . I don't think any war will be shorter or avoided by sending audiences into *The Green Table*."

It seems that he created *The Green Table* not to prevent the war but because a lot of people would soon need to think about death.

When Robert Joffrey revived *The Green Table* he did not think the Vietnam War was "bound to happen." But whatever interpretive differences may have distinguished the two dance-makers, their commitment (shared by Tulsa Ballet) to present the audience with the authentic 1932 classic ensured that their working relations would be very cordial.