

Sex, Falls, and Videotape

By HELEN SHAW, April 17, 2007



Rachel Papo

Dancers in 'Le Petit Mort.' Despite an overhurried structure and a certain conceptual glut, the show succeeds at communicating actual risk, writes Helen Shaw.

seems ready to drag a downed companion out of sight.

Mr. Zustiak's choreography does best in pairs and groups; he demonstrates inventive weight-sharing catches and a fine eye for braiding and unbraiding couples. Dancers alone do less well, largely because the vocabulary turns into conventional gestures of yearning, or, in the unfortunate closing aria by Gina Bashour, a good three minutes of flipping her hair. But give him all six dancers, melting and eddying around one another, and Mr. Zustiak's inventiveness ripens into something rich and strange.

The piece's climax, a red-lit section accompanied by a welcome blast of Shostakovich, does that rare thing in choreography — it creates the illusion of happening for the first time. Roiling around in a hive, dancers take turns falling straight back, and are rescued by the others only as their heads near the floor. The movement seems as unstructured as an improvisation, with dancers just happening to fall or just happening to be borne aloft.

Pavel Zustiak's company Palissimo has tried this once already. Back in December, when Mr. Zustiak's piece "Le Petit Mort/Now It's Time To Say Goodbye" was in rehearsals at P.S. 122, one company dancer fell off a ladder and another ripped his meniscus while preparing for the show. That scarred knee belonged to the indispensable dancer Saar Harari, and so his injury sidelined the production until spring.

It's a good story — because, of course, Mr. Harari is back in fighting shape. But it also sums up what's best about "Le Petit Mort." Despite an overhurried structure and a certain conceptual glut, the show succeeds at communicating actual risk. There are "trust falls" that make you gasp. There are "trust falls" that no one catches. And for a show about death and love, it's important that risk be part of the equation.

Six dancers, three men and three women, stalk briskly around the space. Behind them hangs a long white screen of parachute silk, occasionally lighting up with Tal Yarden's video imagery of static and mysteriously panicking throngs. They fall into one another, letting their legs buckle, bodies beaching on top of bodies. It's hard to distinguish a lifeless collapse from exhaustion, and the group always

As the hour-long piece progresses into its second half, however, Mr. Zustiak loses some of his confidence. Moments no longer hold the stage — instead Mr. Zustiak races between references and images, never developing one gesture into its logical extension. Ms. Bashour "dies" and is coated in flower petals. The excellent Ellen Cremer unhitches her stockings as a ceiling fan lazies. There is a glimpse of a man moving behind a cracked door. Have we tumbled into film noir? We haven't got time to figure it out.

But luckily, just as this Rolodex of images begins to pall, Ms. Cremer and Mr. Harari burst into their meniscus-ripping duet, and the ugly fierceness with which they slam into each other nearly purges the memory of Mr. Zustiak's catalog of pretty pictures.

From the title ("le petit mort" is a French euphemism for orgasm) to the occasional unsubtle crotch grab, Mr. Zustiak telegraphs his intent: This show is about sex. And for long stretches, a smoky eroticism does prevail, thanks largely to lighting designer Joe Lavasseur, who keeps the lights dim, shading the dancers' faces. Dancer-choreographer Mr. Zustiak also shows enormous talent for creating a soundscape, and, with his cross-hatching of radio broadcasts, static, and welltimed silences, shows the restraint he fails to obey in the larger work.

Even in this condensed form, work this exciting is not "saying goodbye" for long.