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In a Harsh, Sexually Charged Universe, Six Dancers Pounce

By ROSLYN SULCAS, Published: April 17, 2007

A fair amount has been written about how the dancer injuries in December and subsequent cancellation (after one performance) of Pavel Zustiak's "Petit Mort (Now It's Time to Say Goodbye)" oddly echoed the subject of the piece, which Mr. Zustiak described as being "about the deaths we endure every day." Then Performance Space 122, which commissioned the work, brought Mr. Zustiak's company, Palissimo, and "Le Petit Mort" back for a weekend run that opened on Friday night. It proved worth waiting for, if rather more opaque than that description suggests.

"Le Petit Mort" opens with a violent, crescendoing wash of sound that abruptly cuts off to reveal a dimly lighted man standing against a wall, arms raised. A supine figure at his feet mirrors his movements — hand to crotch, knees bending, perhaps a reference to the sexual subtext of the title.

The dreamlike opening soon gives way to a harsher universe, as six powerful dancers (Benjamin Asriel, Gina Bashour, Ellen Cremer, Saar Harari, Marya Wethers and Mr. Zustiak), dressed in black with smudged, smoky eyes, pounce upon one another with dispassionate cruelty. Occasionally a dancer is dragged under the fabric curtain that provides a screen for the flickering video projections by Tal Yarden. At other times the dancers are carried aloft like corpses (to a sinister Shostakovich waltz), are pulled roughly by the feet across the floor or painfully flail their entire bodies across the width of the stage.

It's hard to know what's going on in "Le Petit Mort." At one point an inert dancer's feet are washed; at another a triangular clown hat is placed on an apparently unconscious Mr. Asriel's head before the group poses, as if for a photographer.

The video is hazy; the music, mostly an electronic sound collage by Mr. Zustiak, offers a largely neutral aural backdrop. The lighting (by Joe Levasseur) suggests gray bleakness and, sometimes, stark exposure.

There is, however, something here. Mr. Zustiak was born in the former Czechoslovakia, and "Le Petit Mort" has a compellingly surreal aspect and a genuine darkness reminiscent of the work of Josef Nadj, another Eastern European choreographer who creates inscrutable works about displacement and death.

The hourlong piece isn't easy going, and its construction often feels awkward. But its disturbing images of alienation, thwarted intimacy and sexual violence aren't easy to forget.