

CriticalDance

RIOULT Dance NY | The Joyce Theater | New York, New York
Te Deum, Fire In The Sky

June 1, 2017 | By Jerry Hochman

After seeing four performances of the ballet *Giselle* in 5 days, attending RIOULT Dance NY's current program at the Joyce comes as the dance equivalent of culture shock. But the quality of the choreography and the company dancers is high enough that the period of adjustment is minimal, and the enjoyment begins almost immediately.

RIOULT Dance NY's program throughout the week's engagement is the same: two semi-autobiographical pieces which together bookend Artistic Director Pascal Rioult's choreographic output – *Te Deum*, originally created in 1995 and Rioult's first piece for his then fledgling company, and *Fire In The Sky*, his most recent creation. The former, reconstructed for this engagement, is enlightening – and for a first effort, quite astonishing. But *Fire In The Sky*, which had its world premiere the night before I saw it, is distinctive and quite remarkable – and actually precedes *Te Deum* chronologically in Rioult's life context.



RIOULT Dance NY dancers in Pascal Rioult's "Fire in the Sky" Photo by Nina Wurtzel

Dances choreographed to popular music are not unusual. Twyla Tharp and Paul Taylor created pieces that come immediately to mind. And I'm sure that there have been previous dances (and Broadway shows) choreographed to any number of examples of rock and roll. But unlike many other such dances, *Fire In The Sky* isn't an homage, nor does it use Deep Purple's music as background or inspiration for semi-independent dances. What it does is recreate a time and place, including the explosive energy and anti-establishment behavior endemic to it, and invites the audience to participate in the fun without leaving their seats. It's difficult not to get wrapped up in it. It's a dance/concert/party.

Popular music artistic generations emerge with relative frequency, hang around for awhile, overlap with new pop music movements, and may or may not remain distinctive. And the cycle is then repeated. The rock and roll subcategory of popular music is no different.

In the late 60s and early 70s, a band called Deep Purple emerged in England. Initially feeling its way (even going orchestral a la The Moody Blues), in one of its many differently constituted iterations it eventually progressed to vanguard what was called Progressive Rock, which segued into Hard Rock and Heavy Metal. [Save your emails; I know "segue" may not be the most accurate descriptive term.] It was considered in the same league as British groups Def Leppard and Black Sabbath, and was admitted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2016. In one of its many differently constituted formulations, the band still performs.

Popular music artistic generations emerge with relative frequency, hang around for awhile, overlap with new pop music movements, and may or may not remain distinctive. And the cycle is then repeated. The rock and roll subcategory of popular music is no different.



RIOULT Dance NY dancers in Pascal Rioult's "Fire in the Sky" Photo by Sofia Negron

In the late 60s and early 70s, a band called Deep Purple emerged in England. Initially feeling its way (even going orchestral a la The Moody Blues), in one of its many differently constituted iterations it eventually progressed to vanguard what was called Progressive Rock, which segued into Hard Rock and Heavy Metal. [Save your emails; I know "segue" may not be the most accurate descriptive term.]

It was considered in the same league as British groups Def Leppard and Black Sabbath, and was admitted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2016. In one of its many differently constituted formulations, the band still performs.

Deep Purple's mega hit was *Smoke On the Water*, recorded in 1972. Even though the song's lyrics simply referenced a fire in Montreux, Switzerland where the band had prepared to record an album, and the resulting smoke over the waters of Lake Geneva, the lyrics are considerably less important than the sound and the sense of explosiveness conveyed, which in turn converted the refrain into something of an anthem.

In *Fire in the Sky*, Rioult takes this song, as well as *Highway Star* and *Lazy* from the same album (*Machine Head*), and *Child in Time* (1970) from the band's first album, choreographs to them, and in the process takes the audience on a magical mystery tour to a club in which a group like Deep Purple might have played, filled with supplicants (dancers) who come to listen/dance to the music, and for the opportunity either to be their "real" selves or the selves they'd like to be. From a concert to a club to a "private room" (the place hidden from the "ordinary" attendees that you knew existed but would never be allowed into) and back, the theater audience is privy to the outrageous antics, the pounding sound, the sanctioned (and expected) acting out, the magnetic egocentric front man, the raunch, the mosh pit, the sexuality, the drug use, the excitement, the overwhelming exchange of energy, and the sense of being a part of something that makes you feel alive. The piece is not done reverentially or instructively – and it's not a documentary of another age or a recreation. It's a reality, and an Experience.

Choreographically, Rioult succeeds in making a controlled, scripted event look random and uncontrolled. The piece is roughly divided into segments by song, with one segment – the one dealing with the front man's personal issues and drug use, being somewhat distinctive from the others – but the overall ambience is constant. The company dancers who get to move in ways they'd never before contemplated, and to lose themselves while concurrently retaining full control, look like they're having a blast. And Jere Hunt, who played the band's leader and the era's emblem, performed ignited. *Fire In The Sky* may not be a "great" dance, but it's a great to witness and be a part of, albeit vicariously.



RIOULT Dance NY dancers in Pascal Rioult's "Fire in the Sky" Photo by Sofia Negron

Rioult has said that *Fire In The Sky*, his first rock and roll ballet, is intended to capture a formative time in his life where music by Deep Purple and similar groups was a major and essential component. His first piece, *Te Deum*, which opened the program, captures another – when he decided to abandon dancing and focus on choreography, and the pain and uncertainty of that transition.

Rioul first arrived in the United States from France in 1981 on a fellowship to study modern dance, eventually becoming a member of, and principal dancer with, the Martha Graham Dance Company. *Te Deum*, which has been modified somewhat from its initial form, shows indebtedness to Graham, but also – as was the case with many Graham Company alumnae – attempts to explore a different choreographic path.



RIOULT Dance NY dancers in Pascal Rioul's "Te Deum" Photo by Sofia Negron

There are many such "transition" pieces, but this one is in a sense far more literal, and more accomplished-looking, than others I've seen. Choreographed to the composition of the same name by Arvo Part, the piece, not surprisingly, has a spiritual aura appropriate for a life decision that to a large extent relies on faith. It includes, as characters that are readily discernable (it's not the kind of dance that one has to have a doctorate to comprehend), Rioul at the time of the transition, his memory of himself as a dancer, other dancers (male and female) that he performs – and has performed – with, a "muse" figure, and dancers who appear to be imaginary composites of his experiences (or angelic figures representing the same) encouraging him.

From the opening movement when the "contemporary" Rioul figure (movingly played by Michael Spencer Phillips) looks though a curtain both ahead to the female dancer who is – or would be – his muse (Charis Haines) and, concurrently and implicitly, back at the life he's leaving, the dance clearly transmits the ambiguity of his direction and the uncertainty of his choice as he pictures himself with his old company, but also separating and apart from them. The movement variety and stagecraft evident in *Te Deum* is impressive as the "company" performs together and as his alter image interacts with them. Most interesting is a duet that Rioul choreographed for the "contemporary" Rioul and his younger, "dancing," self as the contemporary one sees him. The process of engagement and disengagement is powerful, and Phillips and Hunt (who portrays Rioul the younger) do superb work.

I must admit that when I saw that the program was not only choreographed by Rioul, but was also "about" him, I thought the evening might be too egocentric – a quality often present in a dance company created, inspired, and managed by its artistic director, but which is usually camouflaged as "style." I should have known better. The two program pieces stand on their own, and are as different from each other as night and day. And even if they are autobiographical, that fact had no impact on the dancers' execution. The company dancers are a very fine, accomplished group, and the company is relatively stable. Aside from those already mentioned, they include Catherine Cooch, Jake Deibert, Brian Flynn, Melanie Kimmel, Corinna Lee Nicholson, Sara Elizabeth Seger, and Sabatino A. Verlezza.



Jere Hunt, Michael Spencer Phillips, and RIOULT Dance NY dancers in Pascal Rioul's "Te Deum" Photo by Sofia Negron

Although it was founded in 1994, my first exposure to RIOULT Dance NY was not until its 20th Anniversary. In the three plus (once as part of a multi-company performance) programs I've seen, it's clear to me that Rioul is an exceptional choreographer, one driven by his musicality and sensibility rather than an urge to impose a particular style on an audience, and that RIOULT Dance NY is worth seeing at every opportunity. It's more than a palette cleanser between ballet performances: it's a destination of its own.