



Strong Program Kicks off RIOULT Dance NY's 20th Anniversary Championship Season

by **Bonnie Rosenstock**

February 14, 2014

92nd Street Y - Harkness Dance Center

1395 Lexington Avenue

New York, NY 10128

(212) 415-5552

The Big Apple's sports teams of late might not have the chops to win the rings, trophies or cups, but we are blessed with great dance companies. One of the heavy hitters is RIOULT Dance NY, which proved its championship mettle in its two-night run at the 92nd Street Y to kick off its 20th anniversary season.

The program paid homage to founder Pascal Rioult's mentors, May O'Donnell and Martha Graham, as well as presenting two of his own masterful choreographies, "Wien" and "Views of the Fleeting World." As Rioult explained in his introductory remarks to the audience, his idea was to celebrate his roots, not done very much in the dance world. "I transformed it, but make use of it, and I am influenced by it," he said.

His first great influence was May O'Donnell, whose company he danced with before joining the Graham Company. While O'Donnell is not a household word, "Suspension" (1943), with music by Ray Green, is a modern dance classic and considered by many to be the first abstract dance ever choreographed. It had its New York premiere at the Y in 1945.

Three former O'Donnell dancers restaged the work for the company. It featured seven dancers dressed in unitards of various shades of blue. The remarkable Sara E. Seger dominated dancing on two powder blue boxes of differing levels. She moved seamlessly and lyrically, independent of the other dancers, who did solos, joined together in duets or danced in unison to "become tension points for each other to maintain the order and balance of the whole," the program notes offered.

The dancers held dynamic positions, balancing in a state of suspension that seemed to extend beyond their limbs. They whirled with arms elongated vertically, like the propellers of the airplanes that O'Donnell witnessed below on a hilltop in San Francisco during wartime. She sometimes included in her program notes, as it is here, a quote from T.S. Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton," the first of the interlinked "Four Quartets" (1935-1942), that observed, "...at the still point of the turning world...there the dance is...." And here it was.

After "Suspension," which Rioult aptly described as a piece of "quiet beauty," "Wien" (1995) was a shock to the system, which forced us to look at a parallel reality. It turned the Viennese waltz image of grace and civility on its head. It is a metaphor for the moral decay and atrocities that were committed before and during World War II and could stand in for any of the long list of barbarities that are happening today. The six exceptional performers, three women in muted grey dresses and three men in long pants and muted tops performed as one large ectoplasmic body in a tight, dizzying clockwise path, heads down, shoulders slumped, executing quick shuffling steps as their default movement pattern. Occasionally someone fell, pushed down, punched, assaulted or walked over another. The women

were violently raped in gut-wrenching depictions. When the group dispersed from the tight swirling circle to dance on their own, their cupped hand gestures and vertical arms seemed to turn into a subtle (or was I seeing something not there?) Nazi salute. The piece was harrowing, engrossing and brilliantly executed, propelled forward by Maurice Ravel's heart-pounding "La Valse."

Graham's "El Penitente" (1940), music by Louis Horst, has been a huge influence on Rioult and his work. The excerpt presented here featured three performers recreating roles that were formerly danced by Graham principals Erick Hawkins and Kenneth Topping ("the Penitent"), Rioult and Merce Cunningham ("Christ Figure") and Graham and Joyce Herring, Associate Artistic Director of RIOULT Dance NY and Rioult's spouse ("Mary as Virgin," Magdalen" and "Mother"). As such, the three young dancers, Jere Hunt, Michael S. Phillips and Charis Haines, had the benefit of tapping Rioult and Herring's expertise for their respective roles.

The work is based on the penitents of the Southwest, a sect that believes in purification through corporal penance. Hunt's moving performance included self-flagellation with a thick rope, which left red welts on his shirtless pale-skinned back. Haines, as Magdalen the seductress, was playful and coy, using her eyes, body and a halved large plastic red apple to great effect. The masked and robed Phillips was a formidable figure of charity and chastisement.

The final offering, excerpts of seven sections of Rioult's "Views of the Fleeting World" (2008), to J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue," made use of Graham-influenced transitions and was inspired by the ancient woodblock prints of the Japanese master Hiroshige. It is a magnificent piece, which, as Rioult said, "celebrates beauty and humanity in art, as in life." The dancers were strong, passionate and flew like the wind in it. The opening segment, "Gathering Storm," featured the full company of nine in which both men and women wore shiny grey spandex tops and bright red skirts with stiff billowing accordion pleats that opened out into giant fans. "Moonlight," a duet with Seger and Brian Flynn, was a tour de force of choreography and execution: slow, sensuous movements, for the most part taking place on or close to the floor.

The 20th anniversary is traditionally platinum, signifying strength and endurance. RIOULT Dance NY has achieved just that.

RIOULT Dance NY's New York season continues June 17-22, 2014 at the Joyce Theater, 178 Eighth Avenue at 19th Street. www.Joyce.org. For tickets to the Gala on Wednesday, June 18, call 212-398-5901. The Gala program will be expanded to include several other Rioult repertory works and a world premiere, as well as a video montage that commemorates O'Donnell and Graham's influence on the dance world and on Rioult's evolution as an artist.



Pascal Rioult. Photo courtesy of RIOULT Dance NY.