



RIOULT Dance at Joyce Theater Review

Kent G Becker | June 5, 2017



Above photo: Sofia Negron.

I took a break from American Ballet Theatre ballet classics this Met season to take in RIOULT Dance NY at the Joyce Theater Thursday. The modern dance company offered two works from Artistic Director Pascal Rioult that are deeply anchored in his personal story: *Te Deum*, a re-staging of his 1995 work, and *Fire in the Sky*, a homage to the heavy metal band Deep Purple. Following the premiere of *Te Deum* in 1996, Rioult told the *Los Angeles Times*: “It’s a piece I feel in a way I’ll be working on my whole life.” The piece was restaged this season and, for the first time, the main role was performed by a dancer other than Rioult (Michael Spencer Phillips). The first part evokes the classic Martha Graham style, a reference to Rioult’s career with Graham’s dance company in which he interpreted many roles in the Graham repertory as a Principal Dancer. The score is *Te Deum* from Estonian-born composer Arvo Pärt. It is religious chorus music from the *Te Deum* text attributed to Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Hilary, which premiered in 1984. The music symbolizes the spiritual and religious atmosphere of Rioult’s home, Caen, France.

Te Deum features 10 dancers, many dressed informally in jeans with a stark stage with dramatic lighting filled with fog. The work has a sense of community among the dancers as they performed in various combinations. Recurring throughout is Phillips dressed in a suit as Rioult. As noted by my colleague Jocelyn Deilfer in a preview from a Rioult rehearsal, the dancers obediently adhere to the style while apparently saving their energy and ardor for the second part. It is truly the male duet-Phillips and Jere Hunt-in the second part that captures Rioult’s story and personal experience. This creation marked a turning point in Rioult’s career: after a fulfilling dance life, he decided to become a choreographer. This is a transition that many dancers aspire to but comprehend its challenges only when the time comes. This duet embodies that transition. The interaction between the two dancers is atypical: the male duet reveals a main character seeking support, protection and guidance.

Another essential component of *Te Deum* is the athleticism of the steps; Rioult started as a track and field athlete, and this reference was important to him. The dramatic choreography, where dancers violently fall, bounce and roll on the floor, contrasts with a religious and ethereal music. Charis Haines, in a flowing white skirt, engages Phillips throughout, presumably representing the spirit of Martha Graham (let me know your interpretation in the comment section). The work was well danced with great energy.

Although I see modern dance infrequently and don't have a great perspective on the art form, I enjoyed *Te Deum*, particularly the group movements to the soothing religious music. The lighting was dramatic, adding much to the flow of the work. David Finley did the original lighting with Jim French in charge of the reconstruction.



Fire in the Sky, RIOULT Dance. Photo: Sofia Negron

While *Te Deum* is serious modern dance, *Fire in the Sky* is pure kitsch. The work is a nostalgic homage to Rioult's clubbing days in his youth, set to four songs from heavy metal 1970s band *Deep Purple*. Loud music, bright lights, wild costumes. The only thing missing Thursday was the pungent smell of marijuana smoke to transform me to my 1970s high school days at Topeka West High School.

Smoke on the Water is the first song that any aspiring guitar god learns to play, with a simple, anthem-style riff, followed by teeth rattling bass. It led off the piece with a loud reaction from the audience. With a stage filled with fog and purple lights, the 11 dancers plus glam rock leader Jere Hunt filled the stage with frenetic energy. Recurring steps included a running in place sequence with frequent leaps, all with a defiant attitude. As Jocelyn noted in his thoughts on the rehearsal, Rioult clearly wanted his dancers to enjoy themselves on stage. Dancers communicated that excitement to the audience, to the point where you might feel the urge to join them on the dance floor. The choreography is cleverly tied to the music that the dancers seem to become the instruments: they bring the music to life.

The work continued at a slower pace to the progressive rock, organ infused *Child in Time*, with interesting spotlight effects. The last song, *Highway Star*, continued the high voltage movements of the first song with stomping rhythms interspersed with slow motion movements. The crowd went wild as if they were at a cover band rock concert. Great art? No, but it was a lot of fun.