

A JAZZ-DANCE AMALGAM

By Jennifer Dunning

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AMERICAN dance has been formed and shaped by choreographers who broke from tradition to follow their own lights. In the case of Danny Buraczeski, whose jazz dance pieces are being performed by his company this weekend at the Joyce Theater, the break was twofold. Mr. Buraczeski, who began dancing as a Japanese major at Bucknell University and went on to Broadway show-dancing, chose to devote himself to choreographing jazz dance, a form that has seldom been taken so seriously. But he was also drawn by music that is even more infrequently heard on the concert dance stage.

When Mr. Buraczeski founded his company, Jazzdance, in 1979, that music was the taped sound of the big American bands. He has since moved on to other kinds of music. "Night Vision," one of three new pieces on the Joyce program, is set to three tangos by Astor Piazzolla. Inspired in part by "Imagining Argentina," the recently published novel by Lawrence Thornton, the dance deals poetically with the power of imagination and desire over oppressive political control.

But the other new dances to be performed this weekend represent yet another departure for Mr. Buraczeski, for both "Soulo" and "Out of the Blues" are collaborative pieces danced to commissioned scores that are played live at each performance. "Soulo," a dance for Mr. Buraczeski, is set to four spirituals arranged for the French horn and performed by Willie Ruff, the French horn and bass player, jazz composer and professor of music and Afro-American studies at Yale University. "Out of the Blues," for the other seven members of Mr. Buraczeski's company, is performed to music composed by Amy Duncan and played by Brass Tacks, her 10-piece brass band. Roots of Jazz and Blues

"Both scores come from deep in the jazz world," Mr. Buraczeski said recently. "The thing I like about this concert is that both go back to the roots of jazz, to spirituals and to the blues."

He had long wanted to do a blues piece. "The music comes out of the black experience, and I would never presume to interpret that," he said. "But I got a point of view about it." One of his greatest influences in developing that point of view was his reading of Amiri Baraka's "Blues People." He decided to go ahead when he heard Ms. Duncan's band playing at the Blue Note. He and the composer talked of creating a blues dance that would show the powerful influence of the blues form on jazz.

"There's very little jazz that doesn't have something to do with the blues," he said. "It's sort of like a thread that weaves through all jazz. We decided to do a blues symphony, a trip through the blues."

For the dancers, each night's performance is a new experience. "The band plays a little differently every night," he said. "That was a little scary at first, but good. At first I resented it. But ultimately it is a pleasure. You're forced to be in the moment. And the excitement of music created on the spot is wonderful." Wanted to Use Spirituals

"Soulo" came about when Mr. Buraczeski was introduced to the art of Susan Weil by Vincent Fitz Gerald, a board member of the Buraczeski company and publisher of limited edition books, and Ms. Weil introduced the choreographer to Mr. Ruff. Mr. Buraczeski had wanted to choreograph a dance to spirituals. "Willie had recorded some spirituals at St. Mark's in Venice," Mr. Buraczeski said. "I listened to the record. And the French horn and spirituals seemed to me to be a perfect match."

"Soulo" is performed against a backdrop, painted by Ms. Weil, of a night sky with brilliantly colored birds. A rotating moon moves across the sky. "It is a very fanciful mixture of elements - and very simple," Mr. Buraczeski said. "It's sort of a cliché to say what a horrible time we live in. But one of our wishes was to do something as a gift to ourselves and each other and to the people who'll come to see the dance. We wanted the elements to be beautiful to look at. The set is very intimate and human. The French horn is rich and soothing, and feels very in scale. The elements co-exist but do not relate." Mr. Buraczeski describes "Soulo" as an uncomplicated abstraction.

For a time, it seemed that Mr. Ruff would play to the moon and Mr. Buraczeski would dance to it. But as the two improvised together, Mr. Ruff became something of a piper. "Willie does a sort of meandering pattern of walking, and I do something more specific in relation to his walking," Mr. Buraczeski said. Mr. Ruff's playing in one section reminded the choreographer of a flowing river, and so he followed the musician, crossing his path from time to time.

Hymn of Encouragement

But Mr. Buraczeski got his headiest taste of the collaborative process when he and Mr. Ruff began work on the section set to "Roll Jordan Roll." "It's a hymn of encouragement," the choreographer said. "I decided to make a little box that gets bigger, for an image of one's life beginning small and getting larger. Willie starts to play, walks off the stage and behind it and comes back on. The strength of the music ebbs. I have to keep dancing. And he in effect makes a huge square around me. I am at the edge of the stage when he returns, and we start to walk side by side.

"I was very surprised when he walked off stage the first time in rehearsal. He went out into the hall. He kept playing. The emotion is so intense when the music goes away like that. It was very disconcerting at first. I had to get used to trusting him."

Jazzdance performs at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, tonight at 8, tomorrow at 2 and 8 and Sunday at 2 and 7:30 P.M. Tickets are \$17. Information: 242-0800.

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