

Dance/Tobi Tobias

AS YOU LIKE IT

“. . . *August Pace* is perfect on its self-contained scale. Some of *Oba Oba* is so absurdly vulgar as to be wonderful in its own way. . . .”



COOLING IT: Merce Cunningham's dancers in the new and refreshing *August Pace*.

GRAPEFRUIT SORBET, I THOUGHT, ON THE way home from Merce Cunningham's opening night at the City Center. That, consistently, is what Cunningham's choreography reminds me of—something refreshingly pure, cool, astringent. During the performance I was reminded, astonished at my own astonishment, of the intellectual level at which dancing can operate; the past months of sometimes muddled or oversimplified Balanchine and feeble yet pretentious contemporary efforts had taken their toll. The restorative properties of Cunningham's choreography, present even in his business-as-usual efforts, reach miracle-cure proportions in the better-realized ones.

August Pace may not be a work of epic ambition and achievement like last year's *Five Stone Wind*, but it is nevertheless perfect on its own more modest, self-contained scale. Like the widely appreciated *Duets*, it comprises a series of pairings—seven here. These duos differ, though, in that there is often a great deal of space between the two participants, their connection maintained unbroken across it, as if the partners exuded invisible but potent beams of energy. For example, one figure will serve as a kind of weighted, fixed center while the other describes a rushing path around him, elaborated with brisk al-

legro work. Much is made, in general, of the contrasts between movement that is slow, deliberate—even lazy—and top-speed, whiplash changes of shape. All the movement has a brilliant clarity, like that experienced by a myopic enjoying a freshly increased prescription for his lenses.

Intermittently, as the duets progress, “wild card” dancers operate quietly in the background, sometimes as static as sculpture or as slow-moving as mobiles in a desultory breeze, occasionally tearing across the stage to disrupt, momentarily, the channel of communication between the main pair. The duets themselves, always coupling male and female, offset this conventionality with their progressive insight into gender-determined role playing. Time and again, the woman, as if on split-second impulse, recklessly abandons her balance and flings herself at the man, receiving just the needed support at just the right second to avoid sudden death. And yet she assumes none of the customarily attendant emotional stances of fragility, seduction, or dependence. Cunningham is equally forward-looking in the way he ends the work; it just stops. It doesn't sum up, it doesn't climax or conclude with portentous fanfares, it just stops the instant it has said its piece, with the impersonal efficiency of a light click-

ing off—a finish dramatic in its own way.

The backdrop for the dance, by the 24-year-old Soviet visual artist who calls himself *Afrika*, is a stretch of parchment-colored fabric resembling raw canvas. Its unadorned left side functions as an invitation to adornment by both the dancing and the viewer's imagination. Near the center, it is sparsely and randomly rubber-stamped with Russian characters—perhaps a reference to the artist's exit permit, a passage to the physical freedom and liberty of expression that has lately taken on worldwide significance. Off to the right, in two columns, are numbers, each accompanied by a pictograph that might have been painted by an extremely sophisticated child. The overall effect is light and elegant in a Cunningshamesque way, and every last one of the factors in the designer's work—the laconic quality, the fortuitous beauty inherent in random ordering, freedom of space and interpretation—echo familiar Cunningham principles.

The numbers recur emblazoned on the dancers' backs, a device that, supplemented by the program notes, helps you put names to the performers. The costumes, dictated by *Afrika* as well, are turtlenecks and trousers, commonplace as those featured in Gap ads—white for the men, black for the women. All the couples being man-woman, I suspect the clothes constitute a play on the yin-yang symbol—the interlocking S-curves that symbolize the completeness attainable by harmonizing male and female qualities, displayed here in the infinite visual variation dance allows by adding motion to image. Michael Pugilese's score, *Peace Talks*, consists of electronically enhanced “ethnic” percussion. Unhappily, it fails to match the other components of the dance in freshness and invention.

A second new work unveiled in the company's two-week season was mundane—a goodly length of Mercian wallpaper ironically called *Inventions*. Its score, John Cage's *Sculptures Musicales*, which committed intermittent assaults on the ear with electronic equivalents of foghorns, electric saws, and gunfire, at least made one alert to the subtly varied nature of the relative quiet we mislabel silence. Carl Kielblock's choice of ill-cut, ill-fitting unitards in assorted tints of green—every