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Pushing classicism's boundaries way into the stratosphere

ARMITAGE GONE DANCE

The Duke on 42nd Street
229 West 42nd Street
212-239-6200
Through December 18

MOLTEN BALLET

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

In 1981, Karole Armitage—after two years dancing with the Geneva Ballet and five in Merce Cunningham's company—choreographed *Drastic Classicism*. It caused a stir—partly because of Rhys Chatham's

music and the wacky costumes, and partly because Armitage seemed to be stretching everything she knew to an obstreperous limit and spattering it against the walls.

The term "drastic classicism" describes her newest work, *in this dream that dogs me*. After building a big and ongoing career in Europe—directing companies, choreographing for other groups, working in film and opera—Armitage has reinvented her ensemble, Armitage Gone Dance, pruning away the punk aura and the references to hip-hop and Indian Bharata Natyam and avoiding complex theatrical narratives like the one that drove her 1996 Michael Milken extravaganza *The Predators' Ball: Hucksters of the Soul*. "Drastic" now applies solely to the bodies of her extraordinary dancers and the extent to which she expands their classical chops and muscular fluidity into personal statements and sensual relish. *In this dream* is fiercely pure. Armitage's inspiration, Chinese calligraphy, shows in the complex clarity of the body designs, in the strong or delicate strokes made by limbs, but it is calligraphy written on air, vanishing in the wake of new inventions, subtly recalled through repetition.

The men manipulate Howard into complex designs, using her legs to crank and twist her.

A longtime Armitage collaborator, artist David Salle, has turned the black-box stage into a red-velvet room, with a long, narrow swag of saffron fabric hanging at one side and puddling on the floor. A suspended silver tube 18 inches in diameter snakes across the back wall, above which, on a catwalk, sits composer Annie Gosfield at the sampler, plus Roger Kleier (guitar), Danny Tunick (percussion), and Felix Fan (cello). Peter Speliopoulos has dressed the barefoot dancers in bright blue—backless unitards for the three men, bras and panties for the two women.

Gosfield's fascinating score creates a fluid atmosphere—a web of sounds that shifts in terms of density and intensity to echo, counter, or incite the movement. The first section of dancing is mostly a quartet. Leonides D. Arpon, Brian Carey Chung,



Photograph by Matthieu Plecock

Megumi Eda and Felix Fan in Armitage's *in this dream that dogs me*

William Isaac, and Theresa Ruth Howard are prone to clustering when they're all onstage. At first it seems that what the men most desire is to manipulate the powerful Howard into complex designs, often using one of her gorgeous long legs as a handle to crank and twist her. But in molding her, they mold themselves to complete the pattern. It's legal, too, to use nudges, mild slaps, or kicks to get a colleague moving. Now and then all four erupt and punch the air.

Traces of drama slip in. Howard touches Chung and calms his outburst, but when she places her hands on the other men's faces, they wriggle. Howard and the very poetic Chung dance together to a howling, moaning passage of music. They're sensuous, yet they barely touch, as if dreaming the feel of each other. Cellist Fan arrives onstage, bare chested, for the second section. Megumi Eda, who's been waiting for him, stamps her foot to start him playing. Eda immediately establishes a character—feline, preening, faintly demonic. At one point, she steals Fan's bow, leaving him to knock and pluck while she extravagantly stretches and bends her slender body and limbs. She's not always gracious with the men who come and go either—she moves Arpon by the head and then smacks him into motion.

Toward the end of the last section, the five are joined by five newcomers in red unitards who echo them, pair up with them like bright inexplicable shadows, and eventually vanish. A kind of delicacy manifests itself in this final dance, as well as bold moments of unison. An elegant gesture, like a small flourish, crops up. Chung and Howard gently touch each other's chins. And despite the lithe power of the movement, the dancers, hymned by marimba and cello, here seem poised lightly upon the earth.

Armitage follows a path cleared by George Balanchine in his 1957 *Agon*, expanding the range of the dancers' highly articulated limbs. She presents the performers as molten steel cooling into stunning shapes, yet also reminds us that they're not clones of a technique but individuals, with minds, moods, and imperfections of their own.

Read Jowitt on *BodyVox* and Miguel Gutierrez at villagevoice.com/dance.