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DANCE REVIEW: No One Ever Said Friendship Was Easy

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The best and the most troubling aspects of the Pilobolus Dance Theater came through clearly on Saturday night when the company presented the third program in its summer season at the Joyce Theater. Hearteningly, the best included Alison Chase's haunting "Ben's Admonition," a new work that suggests Pilobolus can still blend narrative and acrobatic movement into a third thing that is pure metaphor.

Everything works in this male duet. Paul Sullivan's atmospheric music sets the scene for each quick shift of emotion, from dread to playfulness to affection and back again. Stephen Strawbridge's darkish lighting creates a complete universe in which the drama unfolds. And Angelina Avallone's costumes, baggy pants and heavy shoes that look like combat wear, give the performers the look of being ready for anything.

Best of all are Ras Mikey C and Matt Kent, who dance the duet and helped to create it. They are wholly engaged in the piece but maintain enough of an emotional distance from the material to keep one guessing as to what is next. The scenario is simple: two men cling to each other as they hang from a single rope, suspended just above the ground. The pitfalls are many. Will one man fall away, telegraphing the message that everyone needs a friend? Even worse, will the two end up trussed together, embracing and squabbling for the rest of their lives to establish that relationships can be hell?

All that and more happens in "Ben's Admonition," but Ms. Chase never lingers too long. She and the dancers manage to suggest, much more strongly, the great pleasure of friendship, the horror of isolation and, in the end, the peacefulness of togetherness at a distance. All this is achieved with the simplest of grasps, pushes and swings into space.

Ms. Chase's "Tsu-Ku-Tsu," created two years ago with its original dancers and set to music by Leonard Eto, is typical of worrying recent Pilobolus dances that look like series of best bits from improvisation sessions in the studio. It is hard to find a unifying theme or thread in this group piece by Ms. Chase, from whom the founders of Pilobolus took their first dance classes, in the early 1970's at Dartmouth College. It was inevitable that the troupe would change as it grew and prospered. But one distinctive voice is better than a collective murmur.

The evening came to an exuberant close with "Day Two," a Pilobolus signature created by Moses Pendleton in 1980. Part sensual jungle ritual, part children's wild play, it is Pilobolus at its funky, heedless best.