

## Mindy Aloff on Dance Arias

**C**HRISTOPHER CAINES, a native of Canada, is a graduate of Harvard in comparative literature. As a college student, however, he began to study modern dance with Radcliffe's Claire Malardi, a former student of Hanya Holm, and his future was sealed. Immediately upon graduation, Caines gave up an academic career for dancing, made a beeline for New York, and never looked back. Today, he is a 37-year-old choreographer at work in the city—one youthful dance-maker among many, scrambling to pay his dancers for the two or three concerts that he produces each year. He has an extensive background of study in classical ballet and modern dance, but most of what he made in the 1990s would be categorized as performance art, including "True Love," a tender and exquisite fantasia on Atlantic Canada and Britain, set during World War II.

Recently Caines seems to have had a change of heart about what he wants to do. This past May, at a small, Ladies' Mile-area studio called The Construction Company, he presented a startling 75-minute suite of dances—real, honest-to-goodness dances—whose choreographic playfulness and musical refinement seem to have just lit in from the dawn of British ballet, as if a path not taken had suddenly opened up with possibilities and promise. The work, called "Arias," was performed by a cast of seven dancers, three singers, and a pianist. The dance-making is old school, with clear begin-

nings, middles, and ends; and it is drenched in intuitive musicality and cultivated musicianship.

There is not a moment of therapy in these dances; they are not about "relationships." Of course, how figures relate to one another in terms of choreographic form and dramatic situation is certainly intrinsic to their interest. Although the women, like the men, wore soft oxfords or went barefoot, and only the men—Caines and Brazilian-born Luciano Lazzarotto—performed *enchaînement* drawn from the classical vocabulary, the entire suite operated like a ballet, or like the way ballet used to operate when it was mysterious and charming. Steps were gestures; partnering had protocol and decorum; images were "planted" with apparent off-handedness early on, and then reappeared in the course of the evening in heightened contexts and subject to varying musical impulses.

The ballet steps were drawn from the lexicon of the Cecchetti school, the foundation of British classicism, which Caines first studied in Boston with Marie Paquette, a former Joffrey dancer, and which he now studies several times a week with Caroline Lord, a former student of Vincenzo Celli. The technique of the Italian dancer and pedagogue Enrico Cecchetti—a virtuoso dancer and, by all accounts, a fantastical mime with the Maryinsky Theater and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes—goes back to that of the theoretician Carlo Blasis, with whom Cecchetti's principal teacher, Giovanni Lepri, stud-

ied. It may also have been influenced by Marius Petipa, for whom Cecchetti served as a principal dancer and a ballet master from 1887 to 1902. The schooling places emphasis on strength in the back and the feet, especially in poses and in linking and beaten steps, at which Cecchetti himself excelled. In "Arias," the orthogonal lines, the closely cherished attitudes, the small transitions and terre-à-terre footwork could have graced an evening at the Mercury Theatre. Even British choreographers, trained in Cecchetti from childhood, do not use it this way anymore—with reverence for its academic purity. For a balletomane starving in these crossover times, it was a feast.

Arranged in twenty-three sections, "Arias" is a kind of samplebook of imagery whose subject is the various faces of love, and whose pervasive theme is sleeplessness. Its tone and temper, though, are closer to meditation than to high passion. The setting is a party, with people attired in clothing vaguely reminiscent of the 1930s. At several points, the partygoers participate in little entertainments for one another: the statuesque Sally Hess lolls by an imaginary river, overshadowed by several dancing trees (who break into a Charleston), as Lazzarotto, poling an imaginary gondola, tries to get her to join him on the water. Caines, in soft black gloves and a harlequin mask dotted with stars, mesmerizes Rika Burnham, a porcelain doll of a dancer, to marry herself to sleep through a fragile duet of billowing lifts. Ariane Anthony, in a kimono and sumptuously feathered mask, discreetly chases a butterfly in a solo that seems to have been co-choreographed by Ruth St. Denis and the late, lamented wit James Waring. (The witty Waring, who died in 1975, was a choreographer and a teacher of classical ballet known for his highly individual and often fantastical dances of the 1950s and 1960s, which influenced the founders of the Judson Dance Theater.)

Although a number of the sections in "Arias" are duets, only once or twice are their amorous implications physically realized in a moment of embrace. In general, love here is represented in a symbolic way, through gestures that relate to the lyrics of the various songs that make up the score, through the shape and timing of choreographic variations, or, in one section, "Silent Song," through the enactment of an incident about lost chances as a survivor of unrequited love might remember them. Lit by the choreographer himself in a fantastical array of variations on lamplight, the suite is more or less a collection of nocturnes, some for groups, some for couples, the last for an individual about to bed down in the dark night of the soul.

Along the way, Caines changes his *modus operandi* from literal playacting to lyric suggestion with the unemphatic, practiced assurance of a commuter crossing a subway platform from the local to the express. His mix of childlike candor and mature craftsmanship sometimes suggested the work of Paul Taylor, David Gordon, and occasionally, in fanciful passages, Remy Charlip or Waring, which the choreographer is too young ever to have seen. Yet the range and the sensitivity of his musical-literary responses—which simultaneously acknowledge musical intervals and verbal accents (in Italian, French, and German, as well as in English)—are not like anyone else's, not even Mark Morris's, which have set a living standard for subtlety in this area.

One comes away uncertain whether Caines has actually had any direct choreographic influences. But speaking with Caines, I learned that he thinks he has: Merce Cunningham, at whose school he studied on scholarship for several years. I said that, if so, it has been one of the most beneficial influences imaginable, useful to the choreographer and invisible to the audience. Caines replied that the influence isn't neat: for some years (the years of his performance art and installations) he was so in awe of Cunningham that he was frozen from making his own dances. Only quite recently has he thawed. Without this information, it would be difficult to detect Cunningham—so closely identified with the uncoupling of dance and music—in a work where dance and music are inextricably intertwined.

Still, on reflection, it is possible to recognize certain characteristics of Cunningham's style: the decorum in partnering; the winsome, occasionally spooky, humor; the look of the dancing body in a balance, testing its equilibrium as if it were a pharmaceutical scale. The way Caines casts himself is rather like Cunningham, too: as something of an outsider who provides dramatic focus at key junctures, a dreamer with his eyes open, cavorting with his dreams.

Caines has so many gifts that are suited to making dances and to theater (he sometimes works as a director)—and, owing to impecunious circumstances, he has had occasion to exercise so many of them—that he couldn't even bring himself to tell the truth about them all in the "Arias" pro-

gram. "Set, costume, and lighting design by Beatrice Fairfax," it reads: "Beatrice Fairfax," a name in one of Ira Gershwin's lyrics, is a pseudonym for Christopher Caines. (Beatrice also did some of the musical arrangements.)

A trained singer—he performed the first two of the arias, by Scarlatti, in a warm, sure baritone—a student of tabla and frame drum, a composer, and a pianist, Caines lives much of every day making or studying music, and he makes dances directly from musical scores. The score for "Arias" encompasses two hun-



Christopher Caines and Rika Burnham in "Arias"

dred years of the art song. In the main, it consists of beloved recital pieces from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century: by Scarlatti, Caldera, Caccini, Parisotti, Schoenberg, Gershwin, Handel, Giordani. Three songs by Fauré (like dollops of palate-clearing *granité* between courses at a banquet) effect a gentle transition from the "Silent Song" to the resonant declarations of austere suffering in the Schoenberg numbers, all with lyrics by Stefan Georg and drawn from the suite "The Book of the Hanging Gardens." Cool and lilting, the Fauré selections serve as unusual choices to represent the nineteenth century, although beautiful choices

they are.

At The Construction Company, these songs were performed by the eloquent and accomplished mezzo Alexandra Montano (familiar to the New York music world for her work in early music and with Philip Glass) and by the young soprano Sarah Gibson. Both singers looked and sounded energized; indeed, they had to be on their toes, as Caines arranged for them to participate in the action now and again. And the dancers were radiant. Caines's choreography showcases women with tremendous wisdom and tact, presenting

each as an individual and seeking out the particular technical strengths of each.

In the case of a 1920s-ish modern-dance solo for Rachel Cohen, he brought with him into the studio Fauré's "Ici Bas," with lyrics by Prudhomme, and the memory of some outdoor photographs, taken by Paul Jsenfels, of dance students in Germany during the 1920s. Their yogic flexibility, their selfless submission to a stream of movement, even their sloping shoulders, so redolent of dancers in that decade, were translated for Cohen into a sweeping, pavane-like cameo that showcased her long legs, supple waist, and shy demeanor. For the compact and muscular Nicole Berger, a young dancer with an astonishing technique that permits her to seem to float or to fall with a kind of coltish grace, he developed a plummeting fall over the front of one foot, variations of which he placed in several dances for her, culminating in her solo to "Someone to Watch Over Me," where the fall was so juicy and so slow that one could hardly believe it was happening at all. (Caines put the fall in one of his own dances as well. His 6'1" frame, falling,

folds up on one hair-raising breath, like a magician's prop.)

"Arias" is an outpouring of creative adrenaline, and its richness in its original form will be too much for some dancers (if, that is, the resources can be mustered to perform it again in its entirety). Caines has already tried streamlining it: at the Chashama Theatre on 42nd Street in August, he mounted a half-hour version, with Burnham, Hess, Cohen, Montano, and the pianist Argine Safari, and he has plans to use individual sections as seeds for new dances in the future. I preferred the longer version, whose abundance reinforces the emotional overflow

COURTESY JULIE LEMBERGER

of the Italian songs; but it was fascinating to see him summarily and radically edit his work for the requirements of a different venue.

Caines is a genuinely surprising artist. The same month, for the "Deli Dances" series, where dancers performed in Chashama's storefront window, he constructed two installations. In one, wearing shorts and an eyeshade, he simply slept (or tried to sleep) on a mat for two hours, with a small collection of over-the-counter remedies for insomnia lined up next to him. In the second, he slept—this time in pajamas, with a blanket—while Hess, in a nightgown, meditated with her back to the street; at half-hour intervals, marked by an alarm clock, they exchanged places and activities. During the total of four hours that these installations lasted, hundreds of passers-by stopped to comment (and to smile) in perhaps a score of languages. Some of them remarked on the smallest details, such as the names of the herbal preparations. They studied the

cover of a novel near Caines's head (it was *Elective Affinities*). They tapped on the glass to try to get him to acknowledge their presence. He told me later that after the third tap, he learned that if he sighed or shifted his weight slightly when they knocked, he satisfied their demands and they stopped.

Some day, I have no doubt, he will put that lesson into play in a dance. At the moment, for November performances at The Construction Company, Caines is preparing a trio to four World War I-era songs by Hindemith, with tragic lyrics by the poet Christian Morgenstern. The songs are rarely performed and, until Montano tackled them this year, they seem never to have been recorded. When I asked what the dance would look like, Caines spoke of spiders, lobsters, bitter drops, and black angels. "It's going to be pretty dark," he said. I was not filled with foreboding. Darkness is bearable, it is even to be welcomed, in an artist who is also a master of light. ■