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Christopher Caines

Christopher Caines Dance Company
Presented by The Construction Company and Can't Sleep, Inc.
Clark Studio Theater
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by Susan Reiter
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Everything about Christopher Caines' enterprise bespeaks meticulousness and earnestness of purpose. His choreography is deeply intertwined with its musical inspiration, and he selects — and analyzes — his scores carefully and diligently. Unfortunately, a quality of airlessness marked portions of this presentation, an evening of two new works set to Mozart chamber music scores.

Part of the problem was the less-than-ideal venue, which forced one to sit right on top of the work, when its layers and intricacies would have benefited from more breathing room. This was particularly true of "Skittle Alley (Ninepins)" in which a central woman in soft slippers navigated amongst competing contingents in sneakers and toe shoes. The activity was too dense and busy to be taken in with comfort in such close quarters.

The work is set to Mozart's mellifluously charming Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano, K. 498. The ballet's title alludes to the composition's being known as the "Kegelstatt" (bowling alley) Trio because Mozart is said to have composed it during a bowling party. (Apparently he made very creative use of his waiting time between turns!) Caines, who has considerable musical studies in his background, hears and illustrates themes and entrances, layering various groupings in ways that often make it hard to take everything in. The comings and goings are frequent, and the interesting but busy costumes (in shades of ochre and teal, and individualized for each dancer) add to the density of the stage picture.

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Jamy Hsu comes across as a beguiling, somewhat wistful nature spirit as the central unallied woman. The trio in sneakers (Christopher Woodrell, Selena Chau and Lauren Engleman) provide a robust counterpart to the more refined, unfurling phrases of the two couples and featured woman (Michelle Vargas) who move with classical precision. Unfortunately, in this small space, with the frequent, brisk step patterns, the sounds of the toe shoes became a distracting clatter, when one wanted to focus on the elegantly refined playing of musicians Marija Ilic, Meighan Stoops and David Cerruti.

Caines offered us a vision of overlapping worlds as the dancers met and passed in an evolving mix of alliances. At times it all became too much — the movement continued even in the pauses between movements -- and one longed for some breathing space. The third movement offered more to seize one's focus, with Michelle Vargas and Edgar Peterson providing a recurring focal point, echoing the music's rondo structure. Caines deftly mixed and matched his personnel, forming three couples, then massing everyone aside from Hsu into an ensemble of eight, split in half and deployed on opposite sides. Gamboling and jogging motifs wove through with gentle wit, and patterns formed and dissolved with gracious fluency, leading up to a final group pose with Hsu raise up high and center.

"The Farewell to Music," an extensive, probing 55-minute suite in two parts to a selection of Mozart's intimate, richly expressive non-operatic vocal music that was composed for private performances by his friends and colleagues. These range from haunting to impassioned to jokey, and Caines has clearly found powerful inspiration in them, and one senses that this ambitious work is a very personal one. He and Vargo perform a series of achingly intense duets during the second half that form the heart of the work.

After Peterson and Cornelius Brown share the unspooling thematic material of the opening canon, the rest of the dance's first half — seven additional arias — belong to the ensemble. Lyrical lifts, intertwining lines and circles that form and dissolve effortlessly are among the elements Caines uses to create an atmosphere of decorous classicism. The costumes, again attractive but a touch too busy, are in muted earthy tones.

During the piano interlude (set to the Adagio from Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 12) that divides the two parts of "The Farewell to

Music," Caines, a lean, ruminative figure in black, makes his first appearance. One by one, he shares a moment — and briefly partners — each of the others. After their moment with him, they remain still, with their backs to us. Just as the Adagio draws to a close, Vargo, in a rust-red tunic dress and toe shoes, appears.

The eleven sections of the second half offer occasional comic relief — such as the belly-rubbing and mouth-wiping of the well-fed that Caines shapes into canonic form to the lively "Essen, Trinken" — amid a great deal of heartfelt, very sincerely performed material. Caines and Vargo, whose long lines and introspective intensity complement each other well, moved with calm deliberateness through duets that were gentle, wistful and elegiac. She has a lovely yielding quality, while he is more reserved.

The four singers, heard in both solo selections and in various combinations, carried the work along with eloquent unmannered performances. They were: sopranos Silvie Jensen and Alison Taylor Cheeseman, tenor David Root and baritone Christopher Herbert. Marija Ilic was again the excellent pianist.

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