



**Flash Journal, 6-13: Watching & Waiting for the Dance to go Bye:  
Strong Current Stagnates; Caines Expands**

By Chappelle Chambers  
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NEW YORK -- As a teenager, I did a lot of baby-sitting. My job, then, was to pay attention to the children, and to stay awake after they went to sleep. I wasn't paid much, but I could read or watch television, and the parents usually put out great snacks.

For more than 30 years I've been writing about dancing, and recently the job has come to resemble baby-sitting in more ways than I care to think about. The artists are often young enough to be my grandchildren, their efforts strike me as juvenile, and struggling to stay awake has become the dominant response to the work they ask me to view. Reading and television are not options while on the job, and I don't need the snacks, but I often feel deprived of any satisfaction at all. And lord knows, adjusted for inflation, the work pays even less than the baby-sitting did.

A recent visit to the Cunningham studio to see the San Francisco-based Strong Current Dance Company brought these thoughts forward, not for the first time...

A few days later I found myself in what looked like a ballroom -- Studio 4 at City Center. A single row of folding chairs surrounded the dance space on three sides, with the overflow spectators sitting on the floor. At one end of the room sat a pianist, a cellist, eight singers, and their conductor, all in formal attire. The program, by the Christopher Caines Dance Company, was called "Worklight." It was performed in full room light, as the studio is not equipped with specialized lighting instruments. The virtue of this situation is that a critic can see -- and therefore, later, decipher -- her notes, and read the playbill during musical interludes; the disadvantage is that you are viewing choreography against the backdrop of other watchers, and sometimes it's hard to focus on the movement design; Caines gave himself space at the expense of theatrical illusion. This studio is considerably larger than the Construction Company room into which he's been cramming his dances for years, and allowed his work to grow considerably. In the ensemble pieces he created patterns in which the dancers could stroll, march, and jog, and even run backwards. Perhaps he can get someone to produce these largely light-hearted dances in the garden at the Cooper-Hewitt, or at Wave Hill; the work calls out for traditional architecture and floaty dresses, for a century or two gone by.

Caines is a ballet choreographer, working in a classical idiom even when his dancers are barefoot or in soft slippers. He's deeply musical, and seems to have poured much of his 2006 Guggenheim award into the live presentation of everything from Bach and Thomas Tallis to the quirky vocal compositions of Ernst Toch. A highlight of the evening was a dramatic trio for two men (Edgar Peterson and Christopher Woodrell) and one woman (Michelle Vargo) on pointe, to Gaspar Cassado's Suite for Solo Cello, a Spanish-flavored piece that built from small gestures to heroic proportions. Caines does not fear strong sentiment, and his female dancers, at least, are up to the challenge of maintaining physical control while remaining emotionally labile; the men occasionally looked strained. Another standout was Caines's intimate duet with Sabra Perry to three songs by Mozart, although at points in this one I could see him thinking when I wanted to see him feeling. But sitting in a folding chair identical to the one at Cunningham, I totally forgot about my aching body, and was pretty much transported through the entire 80-minute, intermissionless program.

To choreograph on this scale, to live music, you need a lot of friends, and I am one of Christopher's. This sweet-natured guy is attuned to the needs of the dance community and has a great range of talents, ranging from writing and editing (he worked on the "International Encyclopedia of Dance") and lighting and stage design to many varieties of musicianship. In addition to dancing in this performance he played several different drums and sang in one number. His career is an interesting index of how much dedication it takes to succeed in this business in this town; he's been making dances since 1990, and is only now beginning to get the recognition he deserves. This concert is a great example of the difference live music makes; it brings the space alive and buoys the dancers.