

Twyla Tharp's *Fait Accompli*

ing, as well as an unabridged dictionary of what can best be described as American street movement: saunter, lunge, dodge, slouch. The dance happens in an environment created by Jennifer Tipton out of a dense amber haze that pours onto a bare floor from banks of lights hung in full view of the audience high above the rear of the stage. Midway between the ground and the flies, a cross-wash of deep blue floats like a perpetual fog. The dancers wear black shorts and tanktops with white shoes and socks, designed by Santo Loquasto. (Can we admit that, by merely sharing the planet with Tipton and Loquasto, we live in a golden age of stage design?) Here is the world as gymnasium, where the pace, set to the driving pulse of David Van Tiegham's score, can be both frenetic blur and slow-motion exhaustion. Octets of racers emerge through the mist to suddenly disappear beyond the reach of the light; quartets of karate fighters jab while boxers dodge and punch. Figures gasp in unison in the viscid air; some shade their eyes and squint through the murk; a few drop to their knees, down for the count. There is no pairing, only lines moving in

unison or momentary encounters among isolated individuals trying to hold their own in the immense complexity. The sexes are generally kept separate and differently occupied.

The total effect is breathtaking in its energy and deeply disturbing in its implications, an image of and for our times: joggers weaving through grids of fuming traffic, keeping in shape at the expense of their health, racing ahead to stay in place. The galvanizing tension lies between a ruthless drive for achievement and crushing mortality. At the end of the first part, the dancers are swallowed into the indefinable blackness that hovers onstage. Do they die or just lose out on life? It's all the same.

If part one of *Fait Accompli* creates a world, part two imagines a life. Twyla Tharp dances (plays) Twyla Tharp—a small, feisty, quite unsentimental creature whose quick, searching little steps take her from one to another of the males in her company as they glide past her like so many sleepwalkers. She engages each in a *pas de deux*, sometimes molding their motions to her own but more and more manipulated by them in encounters that can be briefly comic or tender

but finally become melancholy, even despairing. Before they too disappear into the darkness, they hoist her aloft and pass her inertly from hand to hand. But the piece does not end in pain and exhaustion. Left alone, the punchdrunk figure gets up, does a spunky little coda and skates off slowly, silhouetted in the glare of footlights which suddenly open onstage.

The last image is unmistakable: the ageless metaphorical bond between the stage and the world, theatre and life. But what is also theatrical about this work, in a more restrictive sense of being play-like, is a thematic range and density seemingly impossible in "pure" dance. Both sections issue open invitations to be "read" and interpreted. The presence of character and action in the second part does not result in plot or narrative, but there is certainly the rich possibility of allegory—social, psychological and historical. My rather literary sensibility says that *Fait Accompli* exists just short of words, but such a sentiment insults it. It needs no words to engage both emotions and the brain. For words (along with everything else), I should go back to the theatre. □