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LARRY KEIGWIN MAKES DESIGNS FOR CITY LIVING

By Deborah Jowitt

I don't know where Larry Keigwin grew up, but he choreographs like a New Yorker. I'm not just talking about his showbiz talents and proclivities (once a dancer on Club MTV, assistant choreographer for the Rockettes, choreographer of an Off-Broadway musical, and more). I'm talking about his evident love of city geography, with narrow streets full of hurrying pedestrians. He must dream in grids.

The stylish, sleek, excellently crafted dances that he makes for his own company present a formalized image of urban activity. Bolero NYC, his wonderful 2007 take on Ravel's Boléro, mingled volunteers of all ages and sizes with his company members in nonstop, intersecting promenades that trumpeted the diversity of types and eccentric individuals that enliven our city.

Two earlier pieces and one new one featured on the company's Joyce program, however, minimize individuality while taking clever digs at conformity. The prevailing image I retain of them is one of rapid, steady pacing with smart rhythmic upsets. Caffeinated (2001) and Runaway (2006) were both made for students in conservatory-style dance departments (NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and the Juilliard School, respectively) and later adapted for Keigwin + Company. They're bright, youthful, peppy pieces that ring beguiling changes on single ideas.

The title of Caffeinated is self-explanatory. Wearing black-and-white street clothes by Jen Houghton, the dancers speed through their day, helping the rapid, repetitive rhythms of "Funeral" from Philip Glass's opera Akhnaten as they build to a screaming fever. No matter how tricky the steps (Keigwin sets up some in his opening solo), no performer relinquishes the take-out cup that seems to have bonded with his or her hand. And however many times they cluster or need refills or do backflips, these people go, go, go. In the end, shaking slightly, they offer us their cups.

Runaway is less rich in terms of dancing, but it, too, is ingeniously engineered. Clifton Taylor's original design, adapted by Burke Wilmore, surrounds the stage with a rectangular path of white light, with branches that continue up the aisles of the Joyce. The eight Keigwin + Company members and nine guest dancers are dressed for the runway—the men in dark suits and narrow ties, the women in short, bright-colored shifts and wigs that give new meaning to the word "bouffant" (costumes by Fritz Masten). Everyone is barefoot, but the women do the runway slink as if they're wearing heels. The percussive music by Jonathan Melville Pratt sounds a bit



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like horses trotting, and certainly this is a runaway fashion show. Jackets come off and go back on; a few performers appear in underwear. Women hold themselves as stiffly as store-window dummies when guys hoist them and carry them away. Men leap as if in mindless desperation.

The section titles of Keigwin's new Bird Watching are all F-words: "Flocking," "Flapping," "Fluttering," and "Flying." Knowing Keigwin, any unruly connotations, however, are stringently downplayed. The choreography seems to riff off "Birds of a feather flock together." Matthew Baker, Ashley Browne, Aaron Carr, Kristina Hanna, and Liz Riga seek conformity so urgently that, for most of the dance, they're all dressed alike in glittery white bodices and swirly little black skirts (costumes by Masten). A chandelier hangs overhead. The music is Haydn's Symphony No. 6, and these five people aspire to elegance. Over and over, they shake one hand, decorated with sparkling rings, in front of their faces—showing off or perhaps discreetly fanning or clawing at themselves.

Sometimes these birds in display mode strut holding onto their own shoulders so that their elbows make sassy wings. They flock in orderly wedges and lines like airborne geese. The acts of flapping and fluttering don't seem wildly different from each other, although Browne has what's clearly a flutter with the two men. In the final section, "Flying," the men spring into the air and beat their legs together.

Keigwin's theatrical sense is so acute that he can even make a necessary scene change into an event. Yet I wish I'd seen the attractive Bird Watching on a program less loaded with pieces featuring regimentation and uniformity, and I was grateful he gathered together six marvelous small pieces from 2001 through 2004 in Mattress Suite to form a narrative of sorts. In this, Keigwin gives us the subtleties of desire, hesitation, fear, as he and the magnificent Nicole Wolcott jockey

around on a queen-size mattress in Straight Duet, and Cecilia Bartoli's voice cascades through the aria of a woman scorned (Vivaldi's "Sposa Son Disprezzata"). Complicated feelings, given a witty edge, also enrich Three Ways (set to "Di Provenza" from Verdi's La Traviata). Baker, Carr, and the choreographer share the mattress with a wary intimacy that says, "That was fun. What now?" In Mattress Suite, Keigwin lets the soul shine in.

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