

Uncommon middle ground

Innovative and cutting-edge choreography didn't show up in the usual experimental spots, but in more mainstream venues

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The idea of an avant-garde may have lost its currency in the other arts, but in dance, the experimentalists still seemed to be driving the field forward — until this year. Now it's clear that the people on the cutting edge are tumbling off. The action has migrated to more conventional forms of modern dance and to ballet, that inherently conservative genre.

At experimental venues such as The Kitchen and Dance Theater Workshop, local and foreign dance-makers dispensed with the pillars of choreography this year: a carefully honed lexicon of movement and the structural underpinnings to hold a work together. Instead, Levi Gonzalez at Dance Theater Workshop; Lee Sher and Saar Harari at PS 122; and Alain Buffard at Danspace Project, among others, scrutinized the line between performers and audience, between stage persona and actual person. That old trick again — in which the frame of the artwork is almost all there is to it!

Why the heedless borrowing from theater and visual art and the inattention to the special powers of dance? If choreographers have internalized the culture's general disregard for their work, why now? People have considered concert dance silly ever since it began.

A few bright spots shone in the experimentalist gloom: Besides premieres by Luciana Achugar and Sarah Michelson (see the "best of 2006" list), Christopher Williams continued his lovingly obsessive portraits of medieval saints at Danspace Project and Dance New Amsterdam. The decision to make dances about issues sinks many a modern-dance choreographer: How do you dance an issue, anyway? Williams avoids this conundrum by

organizing his magnum opus around characters — men who lived and died wholeheartedly, with virtue on one side and gruesome death on the other.

You can usually count on the vast middle ground of modern dance to set pieces to tuneful music and to choreograph steps, but also to play it safe. In 2006, the middle got edgy.

Brooklyn native Ronald K. Brown possessed many strengths even before he celebrated his 20th anniversary — at the remarkably young age of 39 — at the Joyce Theater this winter. They include an exciting style that blends undulating West African traditional dance with sharp African-American street gesture and a gift for fluid geometries. This season, he eased away from pat, happily ever after endings, letting dances end with strife still in motion.

For his own 20th anniversary, Syosset native Doug Varone also made forays into bolder forms, without losing any of his musical keenness and gestural vivacity.

Even the Europeans came in more varieties. Usually the companies that can afford to cross the pond are better at dreaming up big ideas than at discovering a unique and honest language for expressing them. But the gripping concerts presented at the Joyce of Finland's Tero Saarinen and Netherlands-based Italian Emio Greco both featured a rough and beautiful poetry of steps.

With modern dance moving in from the edges, that onetime palace of middlebrow, the Joyce Theater, is worth taking seriously again. Its programming for 2006 was the best in years. But the paucity of women choreographers at that Chelsea venue

points to another conspicuous, if gradual, change: Though women invented modern dance, they no longer dominate as performers or creators.

Ballet

In ballet, choreographers experimented gently, without sweeping away the beautiful codified language. Three choreographers — the Italian Mauro Bigonzetti, the Russian Alexei Ratmansky and British emigre Christopher Wheeldon — grew sweetly self-conscious about ballet's artifice for the New York City Ballet's springtime Diamond Festival of new works.

In Bigonzetti's intriguing "In Vento" and Ratmansky's masterful "Russian Seasons," the dancers don't wait until the curtain to bow elaborately or knead their caives. With Mark Stanley's pearly lighting (the exception to the recent rule of murkiness), Wheeldon's mystic, neoclassical "Evenfall" mines the full possibilities of that magical mid-torso halo, the tutu. In his hands, the familiar costume becomes, among other things, a pure white sun enveloping the dancers.

Top 10 Apollinaire Scherr

1. The European Dream Festival. Until this year, a cash-strapped New Yorker's idea of European dance was largely confined to the big names at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Lincoln Center. But with the inauguration of this multi-arts, multi-venue festival, our sketchy picture began to fill out. Jump-started by a generous grant from the European Union, the six-week celebration was dedicated to artists that, until then, we'd only dreamed of getting to see.

2. Alexei Ratmansky. Short on brilliant choreographers, the world of classical dance has rejoiced at Christopher Wheeldon's progress over the past decade. Now he has competition. Ratmansky, the young director of the Bolshoi Ballet, demonstrated with his "Russian Seasons" for the New York City Ballet's Diamond Project last spring that his refreshing "Bright Stream" in 2005 was no accident. With Wheeldon set to vacate his post as City Ballet's resident choreographer in 2008, the company should woo this Russian hard.

3. Tero Saarinen and Emio Greco. With their fervent belief in the old-fashioned mission of modern dance — that each choreographer creates an expressive language of his or her own — these Europeans could renew even the most damaged faith in the form.

4. "Dogs." The year's best radical adaptation, with the best visuals. For her debut at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave festival, British emigre Sarah Michelson may have refashioned the look of ballet's female birds and elusive muses, but she kept their mysteries intact. The palatial Op-Art crypt that she and dancer Parker Lutz conjured from the dilapidated Harvey Theater added to the dance's magic.

5. "Not-About-AIDS-Dance." Best revival. The supertitles that appear over the heads of the even-keeled dancers in Neil Greenberg's widely acclaimed, yet rarely seen, 1994 masterpiece dispassionately describe the dance's own creation — and the AIDS epidemic: While the choreographer was making this work, his friends were dying all around him. Weaving life

and art together in a rich, contradictory web, "Not-About-AIDS-Dance" should be revived not every 12 years, but every year.

6. "Exhausting Love." Bravest, slyest parody. For her premiere at Danspace Project, Uruguayan emigrant Luciana Achugar pushed to the limit downtown dance's current yen for the simple and sloppy. The result was a hilarious and surprising work about the exhausting ritual of — what else? — modern dance. Baring their unsexy underwear, falling out of their dull dresses, Achugar and her posse of women never broke character to confess what a parodic mess they were making of their big, big love.

7. Diana Vishneva. Best 21st century candidate for "Ballerina for the Ages." The next time someone laments the decline of the ballerina breed, whisper the name of this Kirov phenomenon, now appearing with American Ballet Theatre each spring. Anyone who wonders whether the ballet classics are worth keeping will stop, after seeing Vishneva make sense out of them.

8. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Asha Thomas and Abdur-Rahim Jackson. It doesn't matter which dance you put these troupers in, they stand out. Miraculously, they also look different with each outing. Their bright, textured steps deliver nothing short of the essence of each dance.

9. Clifton Brown and Sean Patrick Mahoney. Widest wingspan. The spread arms of Mahoney, from the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and Brown, of Alvin Ailey, seem to span the whole stage, and make you want to take flight. Of course, it's their graceful dancing that causes their long limbs to matter.

10. Gwyneth Muller. Best of the corps. In the house of Balanchine, everyone's moving and everyone counts. With her crisp attack and effervescence, Muller counts extra. Performing with the New York City Ballet for six years now, she brings a welcome frothiness to Balanchine's delightful "Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet" and finds the right note of spikiness in his "Movements for Piano and Orchestra." She embodies the boast that a corps dancer in City Ballet could be a star anywhere else. We should be grateful she isn't anywhere else.