

The Arts

DANCE REVIEW

Fate and Indifference, as Dissected by Descartes

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

Tough, fiercely original and defying expectations, the French choreographer Maguy Marin gets down to the basics of human behavior in "Waterzool," the New York premiere that her modern dance troupe, Compagnie Maguy Marin, presented on Tuesday night.

What a wonderful piece of work is man, Ms. Marin agrees, but she, for one, is intent on examining both light and shade. Like the Belgian stew that provides its title, "Waterzool" is a mix of text, dance and music that zeroes in on Ms. Marin's favorite theme: man's fate.

This catalogue of emotions, acted out on a bare stage in set movement sections and interspersed with verbal aphorisms, might initially suggest a cerebral collage of non sequiturs. But Ms. Marin's ingenious brand of dance-theater is never devoid of the pungent image: It has the arrow of insight that plunges straight to the heart.

From joy and slapstick, the range of vignettes (many of them humorous) reaches out to hate and terror. Four visual episodes stood out particularly at the Joyce Theater (175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, in Chelsea), where the company opened a two-week run.

In one unpredictable, chilling passage, a brutal interrogator strip-searches Mychel Lecon, a dancer of subtle but assured presence, in a humiliating manner. Yet within moments, the nude figure on all fours molds itself, through extended and retracted limbs, into sculptured form. The totalitarian image yields to a Michelangeloesque resonance: Amid horror, human dignity will be reaffirmed.

Ms. Marin couches her message in universal terms, which is very different from the confessional tone favored by experimental American choreographers when they provide a take on life. But as three other images showed, she can also create intimacy.

Aspects of love are explored by Preciosa Gil and Thierry Parraud, as whispering lovers: their tense gymnastic entanglements offer an ambivalent but unmistakable eroticism. In a polished comedy of insults, Bastien Parnasse and Karim Sebbar move through a combative male duet that nonetheless requires mutual support. Guilt is embodied by Cathy Polo, who admits to murder under the barked commands of Isabelle Missal. At the same time, a chorus of men amplifies this state of anguish by echoing the words and by walking through striking formal patterns around the stage.

"Waterzool" is, in fact, a highly formal piece, and it is abstract in the best sense; whatever the emotion or relationship scrutinized, it is distilled rather than depleted. All this is accomplished with minimal stage effects. Denis Mariotte's delightful score for toy instruments (snare drum, xylophones, harmonicas, kazoo, triangles, cow bells) is played onstage at times by the dancers and adds to the sense of innocence violated.

Ms. Marin's springboard for the narrated text came from Rousseau and his preoccupation with natural man, as well as from Spinoza and Descartes. When "Waterzool" received its United States premiere last year at the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., Descartes was identified as the main source of inspiration.

At the Joyce, there is no acknowledgment that what Christiane Gliik reads is an English narration drawn

mainly from that philosopher's treatise, "The Passions of the Soul." Nonetheless, "Waterzool" has the aura of a rational examination of the human condition.

Ms. Marin has obviously opted for an especially spare production. Montserrat Casanova's beige and white streetwear provides an apt sober touch, a contrast to her elaborate production values in most of the Marin works seen here since 1983, especially the choreographer's dollhouse view of "Cinderella" for the Lyons Opera Ballet.

Instead, the dancers in Ms. Marin's own troupe (who include Ulises Alvarez, Caroline Picard, Barbara Sarreau, Dominique Uber, Ennio Sammarco and Adolfo Vargas) are on their own, making dramatic points and delivering verbal and kinetic punch lines with speed or understatement.

In a segment on friendship, for instance, the test is brief and to the point. A man with a refrigerator on his back is approached by men defined by Ms. Gliik as "friends." They appear eager to help but don't. The next group, called "pals," don't even pretend. "Acquaintances" merely swarm over the man to kiss him on the cheek.

But "people we don't know," the narrator says in a more serious vein, tend to be those "we don't give a damn about," and they are the anonymous folk who may well be victims of genocide. At this moment, the cast turns to the rear and becomes a faceless mass that, when generalized, is also an image of humanity.

Entertainment Event Dance

COMPAGNIE MAGUY MARIN, "Waterzool,"
Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th
Street, Chelsea, N.Y.

