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Critical commentaries from Vancouver, Montreal, the Prairies, Toronto, New York, Britain, Australia, Denmark, Italy, Norway, Russia and Spain ... and all the latest dance news, books, DVDs and reviews

Compagnie Marie Chouinard returned to Philadelphia after 17 years last December for Dance Celebration's season theme of Out of this World programming at the Annenberg Centre for the Performing Arts. Randy Swartz, the series' artistic director, highlighted the company as a premier event, but said that the response showed lukewarm advance sales because it is "harder sell an avant-garde troupe." Still, there was, in fact, a very respectable turnout for a Saturday matinee performance of *24 Preludes by Chopin* and *Prelude to Afternoon of the Faun*. And that evening's programme of *The Rite of Spring* and the Chopin piece played to an almost full house.

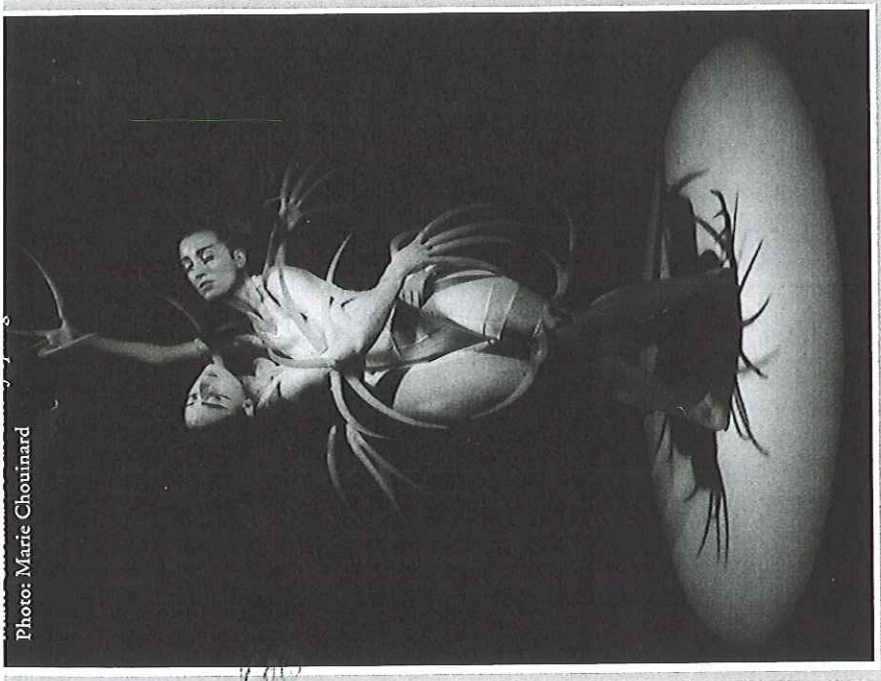
But seems he had a point, aside from some parents escorting their children outside because of the work's explicit sexual content, *Faun* received a rather stony reaction. Count me among the vocal contingent who found this work theatrically profound. How anyone could be dispassionate about the transcendent control and theatricality of Carol Prieur is beyond comprehension. Perhaps some people were too dazed to respond.

Chouinard's expansion on Nijinsky's choreography, the flattened plasticity as the base template, shows the work in more organic ways a century later. So, by Chouinard, this is also an exposé of the core artistry of the work. Prieur, virtually nude, with twisted horns on her head, grunts, pants and has nothing less than lascivious expressions. Chouinard's use of torso contraction and release, rounding out Nijinsky's famous flattened aesthetic, is immersed in his primal concepts and utterly hypnotic.

The infamous scarf that caused not a little bit of a scandal for Nijinsky, Chouinard doesn't use as a climax, she makes the entire piece overtly sexual, leading up to Prieur, reaching up and ripping away one of the antlers, to be used as an erect phallus that she uses to penetrate shafts of light. The fact that a woman is performing it breaks down another psychological barrier of sexuality.

Prieur, speaking afterward, told us that Chouinard herself danced it without the Debussy score, but a sylvan sound field, but, on a programme in Japan, was asked

Photo: Marie Chouinard



just sweep her away in silence, but another woman is in slow motion dervish turns, which go from jerky to silky to grotesque.

Chouinard has trans-era synergy with another one of Nijinsky's infamous masterpieces, *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Scores of choreographers try to put their imprimatur on the piece. Chouinard's inventions just explode within Nijinsky's aesthetic. For the Philly performance, the company dropped the prologue with music by Chouinard that uses liberal references from *Faun* and the choreographer's physicality. Stravinsky meant *Le Sacre* to be brutal and Chouinard's narrative drives deeper into the rawness of the score. Dancers are creatures that advance in comic flamingo struts, they savagely engage with darting heads. Nijinsky's turned in-legs, menacing positions and zombie leaps are all athleticized in this choreography and executed full throttle by these dancers.

Torso sculpting with half-splits and supple, bowed bodylines seduce, then lurch toward a macabre bacchanalia of savage dance where everything is sexualized or gladiatorial. The troupe's in twirling, martial arts moves that are sped up and then butoh-slow. During some of *Sacre's* decrescendos, the full troupe appears and deflates to the floor, arms splayed out, contorted downward in jaundiced pools of light. At one point, a trio of men dance in a stony animation (seen now in some hip-hop techniques), that Chouinard was creating for this in 1993, which is all muscle isometrics.

Chouinard leaves a lot of mystery in place aided with highly theatrical, but subtle lighting, and orchestrally the soundtrack is a brass heavy, propulsive recording of *Le Sacre* meant to engulf. The group formations seem ritualistic, then break away with total abandon. Leon Kupferschmid emerges as the sacrifice in the middle of the troupe spinning with his head flopping around. Later, he executes break outs in what Philadelphia dance critic Merilyn Jackson termed "feral" (add thrilling) jetés. *A Sacre* to remember as a revelatory and moving experience. My only question is when are they coming back to show more?

Lewis Whittington

to add the music, which she thought was too pretty for the brutality of her choreography. But, obviously, Debussy with Chouinard were meant for each other.

The theme of liberated movement continues joyously in Chouinard's *24 Preludes by Chopin*, with men in black booty pants and women in sheer body stockings, duct-taped over the naughty bits. The troupe of 10 in avian formation, tilted forward, a dancer signals a breath, then flutters her arms, then jumps up in flight. Chouinard repeatedly uses bird physicality, allusive to primal body urges, humorous mechanicals and rote impulses.

Early on, Chopin's famous *Prelude in E* scores the dancers in a line in shadow as they hand off a dancer down the line to the forehand tempo and later they line up in a profile of a centipede corps, the simplicity examples of the choreographer's expressivity of the music's character. The 24 scenes are marvels of choreographic economy, with only one or two wrong notes in this performance.

Chopin's moods and evocations are floated in unexpected ways — the grotesque followed by the decorous. A man with his head down and the light catching just his arms, which he manipulates as legs, seem suspended in air as a woman dances in lovely counterpoint. A quick tempo brings on a full troupe soccer game. A woman tries to express herself, and gets more and more agitated and the dancers

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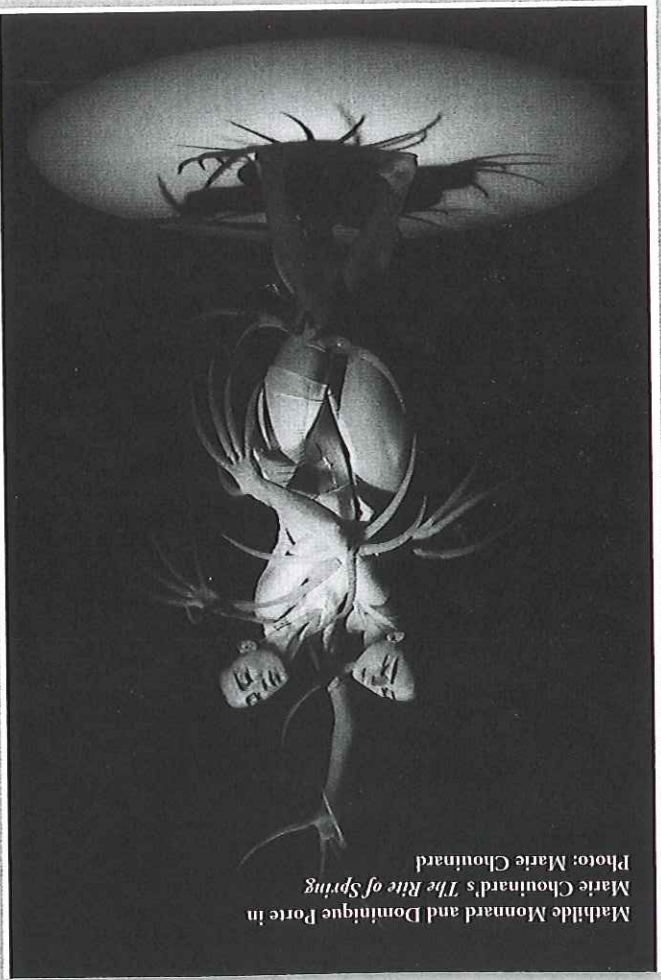
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Mathilde Monnard and Dominique Porte in Marie Chouinard's *The Rite of Spring*
Photo: Marie Chouinard



Philadelphia

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