

MUSIC CONNOISSEUR – JANUARY 1995

FREE ADMISSIONS

By Barry L. Cohen

PAT CATTERSON AT THE BESSIE SCHÖNBERG

Despite its limited dimensions, DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater on West 19th Street manages to provide enough elbow room and ambience for fertile ideas to flourish. With a choreographer like Pat Catterson, for whom less is more, this space venue seems to work, though there were moments on her recent (January 6-8) program, titled simply *Choreography by Pat Catterson*, when it looked as if the theater would not be able to contain her often complex, bursting visions.

The opening *Dust*, one of two premieres, suggests a creative artist with thoughts about human nature and its down side (Catterson's original academic credentials were in psychology and philosophy -- no surprise). Maybe this puzzling work grows out of the scriptural "Dust thou art, to dust shalt thou return," and is meant as a portrayal of what happens in between, humankind's predestined lot. Maybe there is a suggestion of wordplay, like the DUST in D-isg-UST, for we sense plenty of that emotion just when we think love is taking shape. Or maybe it's the dust of angels or of combatants biting the dust or of poor, dirty dusters. We hear the words "I love you" spoken on several occasions, but the relationships always end in hostility. Sometimes there is silence. At other times we hear the glowing strains of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites to which June Balish, Kathie McGowan and 8 others dance passionately while Ben Dolphin serves as a sort of puppeteer. Or is he? We may easily miss the controlled vitality here if we ask over and over "What's it all about?" Like any good artist, Catterson asks questions without providing the answers.

There is nothing abstruse about the meaning of Ms. Catterson's 1991 *Tian An Men*, her program closer. This is a moving canvas of protest -- a relentless coming again and again of massed anger and the inevitable destruction of the mass. It's set to Philip Glass' Minimalist music from *Mishima*. Cheng-Chieh Yu, with hand gestures suggesting Oriental symbolism, was the leader along with 9 other dancers who created an illusion of thousands.

In between these two weighty conceptions, Ms. Catterson indulged us in a wonderful bit of hilariously organized nostalgia -- *The Ballroom*. Her parents (Bob and Ideen) were professional ballroom dancers, and we hear Bob's voice offering instructions to would-be mambo dancers with some of his actual foot patterns projected onto a screen. All of the flashy ballroom characters show up in "Blond Mambo" -- the showoffs, the girls who get snide because their showing off doesn't get them a partner, the guy with only one thing on his mind, the girl with a few things in her body and lots of movement to display them. There's even the earnest, bespectacled little schnook who can't dance a step but is having fun anyway, wonderfully done by Robert Tennenhouse (almost a Woody Allen look-alike). Rebecca Chisman, a cute and rather unballistically built dancer was terrifically energetic in "She-Bop" and with the virile Ben Dolphin properly slinky in "Tango Toss." Interestingly, to us the mambo dancing looked more like the samba (even had that signature "Brazil" playing -- a bona fide samba). Was that part of the joke?

Whatever the case, Pat Catterson demonstrates that her prodigious output of over 70 works is no matter of mere numbers. The dance is in her genes and she has the intellect to back it up with substance. Someday soon, we'd like to see what she does with a larger stage. She'll probably know exactly how to use it.

