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Incidentally

by James Koldenhoven

Seerveld Dance Recital

An enthusiastic audience responded to the finest recital of its kind in the history of dance at Dordt College. I speak of an art form that has long been neglected by the Reformed Christian community, but which has, in the past three years, taken on some sophistication at Dordt. That form, dance, is here regarded as an art, not a social event.

The artist, Gioia Seerveld, is a theatre arts major, but has developed a dance emphasis which she expanded during summers and continues presently at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Though Gioia was featured in this recital, the concert was augmented by dance pieces performed by six dancers from Gioia's dance class. The event took place on December 3, 1982, in the Dordt College Chapel. Professor Mike Stair assisted in the technical aspects of the performance, as well as in the choreography of the featured piece, for which he was her advisor.

The featured dance piece, called "The Virtuoso," was performed by Seerveld on a floor designed to suggest a large piano keyboard. The action was initiated by a valet preparing the performer for the "recital." Gioia was costumed in formal male attire and on touching a note of the keyboard began the music that accompanied the piece. The virtuosity of the recorded music (the program did not, but should have, given credit to the music and musicians) was choreographed with appropriate dynamics and equally appropriate variety. The choreographer made no attempt to comment with or through the music, but used the music as stimulus. The musical selection provided ample opportunity for showing off

the virtuosity of the dancer. Of all the movements that memory recalls, only two are recalled with some discomfiture. These two are the redundancy of a bird-like movement of the arms and the single use of the rolling body. The latter did not seem appropriate to the sound of the music, and the former meaningless by overuse.

Seerveld's performance of "The Virtuoso" made considerable use of facial expression, delivered directly to the audience. This kind of direct contact and appeal had an entertaining quality which worked well with the idea of the piece, but could well be misunderstood. The same question might be raised in connection with her use of a valet at the beginning and end of the dance. Mark Sinnott's work was certainly theatrical, but one might wonder where theatrical entertainment and the dance meet, if they should at all. Seerveld's use of the valet frame to begin and end her piece makes me wonder if I missed a story in between.

Despite these two questions, my impressions of "The Virtuoso" are very favorable and very strong. I was able to join physically into the movement and performed with the dancer painlessly.

Probably of greater power was Seerveld's choreography of "Mean Individual," a piece which featured Mark Sinnott as the leather-jacket tough. Perhaps this description may be misleading. The piece in no way imitated *Westside Story* or the Fonz of television fame. The dance class provided the context in which Sinnott showed his character's powers of intimidation and, one might add, self delusion. This piece differed from the former in that "Mean Individual" was com-

ment. There was no redundancy, and the piece seemed to climax in the movement and tableau which locked in the leading dancer behind the arms, hands, and fingers of the rest of the dancers. With a push of ego, the dancer/character broke out of the human prison with ease and style.

Much slower and very subtle was the third piece, "Fog," also choreographed by Gioia Seerveld. "Fog" was inspired by Carl Sandburg's poem of the same title. The use of space to offer sensations of mass and density was very effective. Twice in the piece, a section of the dance team used their bodies in a slow rolling effect, with the rest of the company giving their movement vertical depth. The effect of the rolling bodies was involving; the idea of fog, rolling, moving, coming forward and engulfing, was effectively achieved. The few spoken lines, presumably from Sandburg's poem, were inaudible. One wonders whether dance and language really ever fit, audible or not.

The question of using language in dance leads us well into the fourth and final piece in the concert, "Voices," also called "Letters to *The Banner*." This piece, accompanied by the reading of letters to the editor of *The Banner*, with a variety of voices, for me, did not communicate. The reading was done over a public address system, and the dance done solo.

I had two problems with "Voices," choreographed by Mike Stair and Gioia Seerveld and performed by Gioia. First, as I have suggested, the accompaniment of language did not work for me. The logic of prose language purports to be more specific than dance can deal with. Dance is not a logical argument. Therefore, it is really not possible to dance a sympathetic dance to the accompaniment of letters to the editor. The other option, of course, is to take issue with the letters—to dance out some kind of satiric or spoofic action. That is not what I saw, but there were moments (when the audience laughed) that the perceptions were just that—perceptions that Gioia was belittling the writers to *The Banner*. I do not doubt

that the intent was to dance a dance in reaction to the letters, but the mode of that response was not clear. I would have to see the piece again to know if (or how) the letters were selected and arranged. But I shouldn't have to experience it twice in order to be in the right correspondence with the piece. John Martin says, in *Introduction to Dance*, "The . . . dancer does not create his work for the mere pleasure of the process but always with the vision that the work itself, once created, will give back to those who see or hear it something of what he has put into it" (pp. 40-41). I, for one, did not consistently feel what was put into it.

I am not overlooking the fact that Gioia's work took on the form of someone listening to "voices." But I couldn't detect if the movement was anterior or posterior to the ideas expressed by the voices being read. Once or twice I detected an action which was overrun by a comment, coming a moment later—to which the dancer gave a response. Such fast reactions, it seems to me, are appropriate for the theatre or film, but not for dance, opera, music, or the visual arts. Consider also, if the movement was to be clearly the response of the dancer (Gioia, let's say), then the voice we heard should have been that of Gioia's interior—her voice—reading the letters. Now we were confused. Were we in the studies and at the kitchen tables of those writing, or in the body of the dancer experiencing these voices which condemn her vocation? Perhaps a lot of my concerns would have been eliminated if I knew that the dancer was dancing out her experience of her reading of the letters.

Martin recalls a story about a man who lost his horse. To find the horse, he put himself in the place of the horse and then followed where instinct would naturally go. Try as I might, I could not put myself in the place of the dancer in "Voices." Maybe I lack horse sense. That is doubtful, however, since I had no trouble playing horse in "The Virtuoso," "Mean Individual," and "Fog."

James Koldenhoven