



LONERS

by JOAN ACOCELLA

What it takes to go solo.

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Sally Silvers got her start in the nineteen-eighties, but she was never afflicted with the postmodern concerns of that decade: the irony, the obsession with style. Always, she has been a straight-out modernist—an abstractionist, a collagist—and apparently this had to do, in part, with politics. Early in her career, when she was given to contributing essays to arts journals, she wrote that she saw modernism as a way “‘to willfully not remember’ the way things are; to not have to exist in relationship to authority, to make a new position . . . not limited to symbols of lack.” Some of her dances have been overtly political. One was about America’s relationship with Nicaragua; another, about proletarian revolutions. But I don’t think it was liberationist politics that made Silvers one of the most beloved of downtown choreographers. It was the transfer that she made from politics to the body.

In 1977, right out of college, Silvers moved to New York to become a dancer, but no company wanted her. “I was too odd,” she told the

Times. So she decided to go it on her own: not join a company, not start a company, but just assemble pickup groups when she wanted to put on a concert. To support her life and art, she got a day job. For twenty-four years, she has been employed by the Labor Institute, an organization that provides unions with information on health and safety. She is truly an independent artist.

Today, people are still calling Silvers odd. If not “odd,” then “quirky” or “eccentric.” These words are accurate to some degree. Her costumes are certainly weird enough. In one piece, she appeared in a beat-up pink party dress; in another, she wore a circle skirt made of bubble wrap. Her sets come from the same part of her brain. In her twenty-fifth anniversary show, which played last month at P.S. 122, the first dance, “Wearable”—a trio for Silvers and two of her longtime collaborators, Pooh Kaye and Cydney Wilkes—featured a huge glob of crumpled paper hanging from the flies. Kaye grabbed a handful of the paper and rode it like a pony. Wilkes took another handful and made a fort of it, and hid inside. Silvers wrapped herself in the paper and spooked around, like a visitor to your door on Halloween. Silvers’s music is more sophisticated. Often, it is a sound-mix by the poet Bruce Andrews, her companion in life and art. These scores, if bewildering—a beep here, a crash there, then a line of verse—at least don’t seem as though they were made by a third grader.

The crucial “eccentricity,” however, is in the movement. In a 1985 article, Silvers described a combination she had made up: “On all fours, lift one arm and the opposite leg, swing leg through to land in crab position, one arm and leg still up. . . . Legs tucked to back, mermaidish jump to land with legs spread.” Try that, and you’ll get some sense of what Silvers’s dancing is like. It is executed, furthermore, with a blithe unselfconsciousness, as if she were a happy little animal, or perhaps a harmless lunatic, going about her business. She knows exactly what she’s doing, though. In that same essay, she said that her aim was to “unknow” the body: “Nothing leads—the body parts become equal. . . . Force the point of awkwardness.” This is the choreographic equivalent of her refusal to remember “the way things are.” The way things are in dance, as in the rest of the world, is that there is a line of command. Feet follow thighs, head obeys shoulders, and the result is a readable,

familiar story. Silvers doesn't want to tell that story. She regards it as unfair, or boring.

But I think that the eccentricity of Silvers's movement has been too much emphasized, or the stress is always on what she has done without (virtuosity, legibility), as opposed to what she has achieved. Some reviewers, trying, it seems, just to explain why they like her so much, have said that the movement is childlike, and has a note of vulnerability. But this, too, is wrong. It makes her sound sweet, whereas she is actually tough and wise.

Most of Silvers's concerts, if they are not totally one-woman productions, contain a solo for her, and the recent show was no exception. Its final piece was a new solo, the well-named "Oven Rack," where she cooked her method one more time. Again she appeared in a bizarre outfit, an indescribable thing of fauxluxury fabrics, red and midnight blue. In keeping with that cross between hip and heartfelt, she danced to a tape collage of Iris DeMent singing country-and-Western songs, and often acted out the lyrics. When DeMent sang, "My life, it's tangled in wishes / and so many things that just never turned out right," Silvers did a huge back bend—a big effort, to no clear end. When DeMent said the morning star shed its beams on her, Silvers doggedly walked the entire periphery of a circle of light on the stage. Elsewhere, she grabbed her foot in one hand and, with the other hand pointing urgently forward, hopped toward the wings. (You thought, How is she going to get out of this? Is she going to fall?) The effect, though witty, wasn't satirical. It was a story about how hard things are. Unlike DeMent, and most modern dance, Silvers refuses to bleed in attractive ways, but she, too, is a confused person, in a tacky getup. Life itself, she seems to say, is tacky, but it's still our life.

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker is a completely different item. She is Belgium's foremost modern-dance choreographer, and those well-funded Europeans don't go around in beat-up party dresses. Nor do they have much truck with old-left politics. They've seen socialism, and they are into something else: apocalypticism. De Keersmaeker's 1984 "Elena's Aria" featured fifty chairs and a promotional film from a wrecking company. God was dead, and De Keersmaeker, like many

other European choreographers, was still pondering this problem. Since her choreographic début, in 1980, she has made a number of pieces in that vein, and some of them have been pretty tendentious, but they had a saving grace. Whatever Nietzschean thing was happening in De Keersmaecker's brain, her gut was that of a choreographer; almost always, there was some formally interesting dance to look at. This is not a matter to be taken for granted in European modern dance. (With Pina Bausch, for example, dance is the least of it.) It is an American preference, and De Keersmaecker may have picked it up in America. She studied at N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts in 1981. Since that time, her work has been a cross between the European (theme-heavy, emotionalist, I-can't-take-this-anymore) and the American (abstract, formalist, shut-up-and-dance).

And so it was with the 2002 solo "Once," which she brought to the Joyce last month. The piece is set to the record "Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2." This 1963 disk, De Keersmaecker told the press, meant a lot to her when she was growing up. What it means to her now, when she is forty-five and has two children and is the director of the resident dance company at Belgium's royal opera house, is the subject of "Once." Baez's performance, with its "folk" virtuousness, seems naïve now. Still, De Keersmaecker treats it with respect, or mostly. The record is played in its entirety, and the words to the songs are projected onto the backdrop, lest we ignore them. De Keersmaecker butts into Baez's act—sings along with her, sometimes upstages her. (At one point, Baez says, "If nobody objects, I'm going to take off my shoes," and De Keersmaecker takes off her underpants.) Elsewhere, she uses the ballads as movement cues, and mimes the mockingbird, the dog named Rover, and so on. Her dancing has a dryness that, in contrast with Baez's warbling sincerity, hovers on the edge of subversion, but she never crosses the edge. And by the end she has found a truehearted stance of her own. Stripping off her dress, she stands there clad only in a pair of black underpants (she had a spare underneath) while the cavalry ride from "The Birth of a Nation" is projected onto her naked body. Meanwhile, Baez and then Bob Dylan, in an interpolation, sing "With God on Our Side." There's the apocalypticism. There, too, I would guess, is a criticism of the American intervention in Iraq. Is De

Keersmaecker also criticizing Baez's belief that her birdsong could stop war? Yes and no. Again, she hovers.

"Once" looked like a structured improvisation, and at points it showed the let's-see-now ditherings so common in improvisation. But the piece was saved by De Keersmaecker's power as a soloist. Solo dancing is an art almost independent of dancing, and certainly independent of choreographic talent. Some first-rank choreographers (Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris) have been great soloists, but others (George Balanchine, Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor) were mere character dancers. No outward ability implies talent as a soloist; the gift comes from within. What is it? Generally, solo dancers have to be older and famous; otherwise people don't want to see just them, and nothing else, for seventy-five minutes ("Once"), or even eight minutes ("Oven Rack"). But age and fame do more than sell tickets; they also bestow authority, the belief that one can stand up there all alone—unsupported, unrelieved—and tell the audience something serious. De Keersmaecker has considerable technical skill. She can walk from here to Pittsburgh on half-point. She can balance forever, with one leg angled up in front, but this wouldn't mean a thing if she didn't fill that leg with a certain pressing energy, which becomes metaphoric power. The same with Silvers. She is less trained, but her intensity is even greater. As she grabs her foot with her hand and pogoes into the wings, she is telling you what, in her experience, is the meaning of life. Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the most eloquent soloists of our time, once summed it up: When a dancer comes onstage, he is not just a blank slate that the choreographer has written on. Behind him he has all the decisions he has made in life. . . . Each time, he has chosen, and in what he is onstage you see the result of those choices. You are looking at the person he is, the person who, at this point, he cannot help but be. . . . Exceptional dancers, in my experience, are also exceptional people, people with an *attitude* toward life, a kind of quest, and an internal quality. They know who they are, and they show this to you, willingly.

That knowledge, and the power to make it register, is what sets Silvers and De Keersmaecker apart.