



THEIR SIGNATURE WORK: The modern dance group Backhausdance opened Friday night's performance with a routine entitled Disintegration.

ARMANDO BROWN, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Backhausdance

•**Where:** Knobel Dance Theater, California State University Long Beach

•**When:** Sept. 8

Monday, September 11, 2006

Young troupe shows promise

Orange-based dance company displays talent and flair in a Friday performance at Cal State Long Beach.

By LAURA BLEIBERG
The Orange County Register

Backhausdance is just 3 years old and, like a toddler, it's still a bit wobbly.

Artistic director-choreographer Jennifer Backhaus has both a craftsman's skill and a commercial flair when it comes to putting steps together. Where she trips up is in tying her signature breathy, flowing and acrobatic phrases with substantive commentary. That critical marriage of form and function still eludes her in pieces of serious intent.

She's trying, though. The Orange-based company gave a well-produced concert at the Martha B. Knobel Dance Theater at Cal State Long Beach on Friday and her new work "eXit" showed Backhaus pushing into promising directions.

In "eXit" Backhaus explored a more angular vocabulary to composer Erik Leckrone's fabulous percussion score. Leckrone was seated upstage, his banging and chiming signaling moves for dancers Andrea Brache, Andrew Cook and William Lu in the foreground. Squares of light

projected on the floor confined each of them (the night's imaginative lighting designs were by Monique L'Heureux). Brache danced first, while Cook and Lu were introduced together.

The men were linked in a calisthenic duet, lifting and leaning on one another. Brache eventually joined them for more hefting and gymnastics. Alone and as a threesome, they jogged and posed, often with arms bent at a 90-degree angle like a picture from an Egyptian hieroglyph. The pace was brisk, and the range of movement made it a rigorous number.

But was it more than that? Three is a loaded number full of possibilities and yet Backhaus chose to ignore all that. The work's emotional tone was flat, without struggle, or triumph or passion. The world certainly does not need any more pieces about ménage À trois gone wrong or vulgar sexuality. But "eXit" didn't commit itself fully to any point of view – not even abstraction.

The night's other new piece, "Love and Other Impossibilities," was much more within Backhaus' comfort range – the light-hearted romp. Backhaus took some nightclub-flavored vocal and instrumental numbers by Pink Martini and created ballroom- and Latin-style couples' dances. One dilemma – the company has only two men and, in this dance, nine women. Backhaus side-stepped the awkward gender situation with the occasional female duos and by choreographing group unison passages.

The company's dancers are fresh and perky, and they resembled bobby-soxers all dressed up and looking for love. The shiny, hem-swishing, waist-pinned dresses by costume designer Rhonda Earick perfectly matched the mood.

The three other dances on the program were older works, "Disintegration," "Sitting on January" and "La Jupe." The middle piece has helped get Backhaus' notice and it is a clever and entertaining suite for 10 who spend a good portion of the dance on wooden chairs. It is another unselfconscious frolic, and the dancers dug into it wholeheartedly, which made it all work.

But one senses that Backhaus has more in her than these G-rated, Maypole dances. In "La Jupe," for example, she's after some kind of commentary about women and their relationships and yet it remains clouded and unfulfilled – whether because of timidity or lack of ability is not yet clear.

Dancers Cook and Lindajoy Tashiro-Nafarrete were athletic standouts on Friday, and Brache has admirable strength and focus. But Lu is in a class by himself, the kind of modern dancer who used to high-tail-it out of here following graduation. Lu is a risk-taker, throwing himself to the floor, into the air, without heed. He leapt like a cat and landed on the back of a chair (!) in "January." He knows how to get music from his body.

Backhausdance has promise; with more dancers like Lu, it'll get there.

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