DANCE REVIEW

Framing the Sleepers and Their Dreams

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Lucy Guerin’s “Heavy” will be filmed for Australian television in September, set in an abandoned ward and the underground tunnels of a hospital in Melbourne. But the piece, performed on Friday at Dance Theater Workshop, doesn’t really need a change of scene. “Heavy” creates a world of its own through dance and music alone.

Christopher Bruce’s pressed-metal back wall, with windows that frame the upper bodies of three upright sleepers, adds greatly to the atmosphere of the piece. So does Damien Cooper’s subtle lighting. But what matters most is choreography that is as precise and inexorable as a sewing machine needle and as evocative as a dream.

The rich score is music and sounds mixed by Jad McAdam, a disk jockey from Sydney, and it creates an atmosphere of unnervingly infinite possibilities for lively, shifting, momentary dreams.

The inspiration for “Heavy,” created late in 1998, is the progress of sleep to dreaming as revealed by scientific research in which electrodes on sleepers’ bodies register eye, muscle and brain wave activity on polygraph machines. The wonder of Ms. Guerin’s impressively assured piece is that little of the movement actually refers overtly to sleeping. Instead, the Australian choreographer recreates the surreally labyrinthine quality of interrupted but persistent dreaming.

Are these four quick, precise bodies, moving in front of the wall and its sleepers, restless vertical dreamers or antic recurrent figures in dreams?

Ms. Guerin makes no differentiation, and that is part of the power of this haunting piece. She loses the subtle connection to dreaming late in the 90-minute work, when the choreography briefly looks more like choreography than dream-dancing. But her four deft, enjoyably individualistic performers — Rebecca Hilton, Trevor Patrick, David Tyndall and Ros Warby — never lose that thread.

Anna Tregloan designed the costumes.
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