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Dance: NovEnsemble At Symphony Space

By JENNIFER DUNNING

NOVENSEMBLE, which made its debut on Thursday at Symphony Space, lives up to its advance billing as a company dedicated to performance that has equal weight as dance and music.

The group presented an exciting new work, showcased an extraordinary dancer named Felicia Norton, and introduced to the dance audience Shem Guibbory, who is a company co-director, with Joan Lombardi, and is also an impressive and engaging violinist.

Headed by Mr. Guibbory, who has performed with Steve Reich and other new music composers, the three-musician Cordier Ensemble was visible on and beside the stage during the performance, and its presence heightened the effect of savage wit in Lynne Taylor-Corbett's new "Unpublished Dialogues." Miss Taylor-Corbett is best-known for her gentler works, but she has a dark side that is much more interesting.

In this series of four brief vignettes, set to music by Victoria Bond, Robert Muczynski and E. W. Korngold, each of four couples engages in encounters. The quality of these encounters is made even eerier by their lack of privacy in the face of those onstage musicians, whose presence also enhances an element of grandstanding in the encounters.

The first vignette, danced by Heidi Michel and Alfredo Gonzales, is one of the most succinct of statements about a modern marriage, as the husband rushes into his workday in a series of cross-stage diagonals and the wife rushes into lonely angst, straddling a coffee table. Dawn Watson and Alex Dolcemascolo grapple with larger and larger prop batons and tophats as a seedy dance duo in a vignette that is filled with striking visual imagery and humor. In the third number, a raw-nerved sado-masochist tries to interact with a dopey dolly of a woman, played, respectively, by Mr. Gonzales and Fern Zand. And "Unpublished Dialogues" closes with a nasty but stunningly ob-

served little number for a couple in evening dress. She is a dream every-woman, a barefooted child of nature holding her silver shoes aloft, a mother, and the tantalizingly impervious object of sexual desire, a creation of the man, who responds to her with terror and abject affection.

Miss Norton and Mr. Dolcemascolo are devastating. In Paul Sanasardo's "Time No More," they and four others suggest that NovEnsemble is a company of performers as gifted as dancers as they are as actors. The work, set to a Messaien score, is a dance whose opening moments suggest that it is simply a richly crafted exploration of movement. The dancers spill through paired sculptural shapes, filling the stage with stretching, hunching double lines, brackets and distant vertical parallels. The second section is governed by momentum, with the stage a setting for fast-crossing paths for bodies like tensile columns, propelled by dizzily working feet.

All but one of the dancers are clothed in flesh-colored leotards and tights. The other dancer is in red and she acts as a galvanic force, reminding the viewer that "Time No More" is dedicated to a victim of the Auschwitz death camp.

The third and last section is all arrested pendulum limbs with a suggestion of pendulum swing in the piano part. But it is hard to watch anyone on stage, fine performers though they are, while Miss Norton is dancing

here. One of those magical dancers who seem to perform without artifice, filling space with a presence motivated by the choreography and music alone, Miss Norton does everything with an appealing blend of quiet dignity and eagerness, stretching into a 180-degree leg extension in the last section, for example, as easily and appropriately as branches part in a wind.

The program's second premiere, by Miss Lombardi, is called "Papyrus," and the dancers are dressed in tights and leotards whose color and ruffled edges suggest some papery substance. But ignore the title and the work looks like yet another water study as the three dancers — Miss Norton, Mr. Dolcemascolo and Miss Michel — ripple through the stage in successive waves. The dance is set to a score by Mr. Reich, whose modular music tends to encourage such dynamics.

To hear Mr. Guibbory tumble and soar through the music, transcribed by him for live and taped violin, was almost alone worth a trip to the theater.

The Cordier Ensemble also included Armand Ambrosini, the clarinetist; Jeanne LeBlanc, the cellist; and Gail Niwa, the exuberant pianist. The program was completed by Miss Lombardi's "Tango." The company also included Christine Strazza, David Marsden, Sondra Graff, Celeste Hastings and Cathy Hazeltine.