

December 2001

## ATHENAEUM

### Jae Diego & Dancers

Conduit Studio

Portland, Oregon

September 7-9, 2001

Reviewed by Martha Ullman West

Martha Graham's *Letter to the World* notwithstanding, dance pieces about literary pursuits are rare with good reason: writing and reading are not occupations demanding obvious physical activity. Nevertheless, Jae Diego chose to set her recent work for four dancers in a small-town library, and a nineteenth-century one at that. With spare materials and a great many books, Portland sculptor Abigail Pierce transformed the Conduit studio space into an abstraction of the St. Johnsbury, Vermont Athenaeum, where Diego's grandmother was head librarian for twenty-five years.

Elegant umbrella-ribbed pieces suspended from the lighting tracks suggested the building's domed ceiling: a librarian's desk and floor lamp sat at an angle in one corner, and a reading bench was placed nearby. Books, dozens of them, were lined up against the back wall as if they had been shelved there, becoming in the course of the hour-long work very much part of the action.

Margretta Hansen, Tracy Broyles, Stephanie Lanckton and Dorinda Holler, until they started to dance, looked prim and librarian-like in their dark-colored culottes topped with demure, sheer, white blouses. If there is another piece in today's repertoire that looks like Athenaeum, I'll eat my copy of *Little Women*.

Diego's movement vocabulary, however, looks familiar. Spacious, generous, and shapely, layered with anxious wit and textured with small gestures, it reflects her training in modern and contemporary dance in, among other places, the Boston Conservatory and Harvard's Dance Center. It is much in the style of such Portland choreographers as Gregg Bielemeier, Teresa Mathern, and Mary Oslund, in whose company she currently performs.

*Athenaeum* is nevertheless a deeply personal work, not only for Diego but for the dancers, each of whom chose a particular book on which to center her solo. Essentially, the piece is organized around them, with ensemble movement acting as transitional material. A lot of the transitions were unison movement or clustered; a visually terrific bit had the dancers on the floor, their legs kicked up in diagonals that looked like a series of girders.

Of the solos, Hansen's was the most successful. As a child instructed to be quiet in the library who, body twitching and mouth working like a revved-up motor, wasn't about to be, she was both touching and funny. Her choice of books was a child's edition of D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths*, although that wasn't clear to the audience. The piece's major flaw, in fact, was the inaudible and indecipherable text—in nearly every case—lessening considerably its theatrical impact.

Watching Diego's memoir of another time and place just two days before last September's events and writing about it two weeks later are very different things. *Athenaeum* is on the other side of the fire-wall laid down by terrorists between a time when peaceful contemplation was at least a possibility and a period when contemplation itself was making Americans—this American—extremely jittery. A program note reminds us that the original Athenaeum was built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in Athens and was a sanctuary of Athena, goddess of wisdom, fertility, the useful arts, and prudent warfare. Indeed.