



Tero Saarinen Company *Borrowed Light*

Soul Shakers

A Finn teaches us about our spiritual heritage

by Deborah Jowitt

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I first saw Tero Saarinen's *Borrowed Light* at Jacob's Pillow in 2006. Enclosed by the Ted Shawn Theatre's wooden walls, we could feel a part of Saarinen's vision of a religious community. I wondered if the Finnish choreographer's extraordinary work would be as beautiful at BAM. I needn't have worried. There, Mikki Kunttu's dark gray set—with its walls, ramps, stairs, and platforms—even more suggested a spiritual mountain to be climbed, and the beams of light with which he pierced the darkness created a dual universe of struggle and revelation.

Saarinen was inspired by Doris Humphrey's 1931 dance *The Shakers* and by his readings about this once-flourishing celibate sect. He doesn't cleave to historical accuracy, although he captures the ambience of Shaker communities and draws on their view of dancing as spiritual practice and songs as heavenly gifts received from those gone before. In *Borrowed Light*, eight singers of the Boston Camerata (directed by Joel Cohen) wear black clothes designed by Erika Turunen and move at times among the dancers. In Heikki Iso-Ahola's scrupulous sound design, their unearthly voices float over the space while a mic'd floor emphasizes the earthbound stamping of the eight other superb performers.

Maintaining spiritual focus and community seems more important than celibacy; men and women often mingle. Turunen's costumes help express the sensuality that's hidden and repressed. The men's long, heavy black coats are sometimes allowed to fall open; in a fit of repentance, Carl Knif tears his off and lashes it around. The bodices of the women's black dresses have a slit in the back. Heikki Vienola is bare-chested when he and Maria Nurmela, dancing separately, come together in awkward missed connections (Henrikki Heikkilä has to pull him away and wrestle him into calmness). Belts provide an indirect way for these people to touch: The men grab them and swing one another vigorously around; men and women alike are dragged by their belts.

Rarely these days do you see full-bodied dancing that seems wrenched from the soul and utterly without artifice or elements of display. The men lurch spraddle-legged, reaching upward as if to snatch at God's grace. Leaps and hops thud against the floor. People often hobble with an uneven, limping gait. You sense the gulf they're trying to bridge between reality and a dreamed-of kingdom. In one passage, Saarinen runs backward and forward in a circle until he can no longer continue.

Some of the patterns are orderly, as when tenor Ryan Turner sings of the "great wheel turning" and the dancers circle a cluster of singers revolving the opposite way. But that formal ring dance—getting faster and rhythmically more ragged as Heikkilä literally pushes it around—erupts into the kind of wildly ecstatic individual seizures the Shakers were also known for.

The songs that Cohen and Saarinen have chosen from among the thousands archived tell of the Shakers' love of God and their delight in work and innocent pleasures, as well as their struggles. Egged on and occasionally joined by Sini Länsivuori, Maria Nurmela and Natasa Novotna frisk and frolic like young animals to the spirited song that begins "Virgins clothed in clean white garments." But Ninu Lindfors drops out and, in the light of a single beam, strives to grasp an evasive faith and open herself to grace. Another ray bridging the blackness reveals only the face of soprano Anne Harley as she sings, very slowly and with heart-wrenching purity, " 'Tis the Gift to Be Simple."

Borrowed Light ends as it began, with soprano Anne Azéma singing to Länsivuori, the solitary leader who first called the community to prayer. The "protecting chain" that the words tell of binds this profound dance to our hearts and our memories.