

THE VILLAGE VOICE

January 1, 1979

I find it more difficult to accept artifice in a work that at first glance appears to have "organic" pasted on it than in a straightforwardly unnatural one. I expect an arabesque to be started and stopped craftily; but if a dancer drops to all fours and starts crawling, I seem to expect him or her to reach a destination or exhaustion point before stopping, or else be deflected by someone or something.

POOH KAYE is forcing me to consider all this. Pooh Kaye and her Thick as Thebes (name and title reveal the impish strain that keeps popping up in the work itself). Thick as Thebes comes billed as a "movement and image collaboration" between Kaye, Claire Bernard, Yoshiko Chuma, and Niha Kundborg; and I found it intriguing, stirring, and annoying in ways that still confuse me.

The dance is like a series of rites performed by a small community. A forest community perhaps. Most of the rites incorporate animal images. But there are no clearly perceivable goals or transformations; in some ways the piece seems as arbitrarily structured as a suite of dances. The women enter the kitchen one by one and squat down on what looks in the dimness like a strip of brown carpet. Blindly, they grope behind themselves and crumble and tear the little capes of dead leaves they are wearing. They move out and lie on the polished floor to sleep -- uttering small grunts occasionally, twitching the way dogs do when they dream.

They begin a pattern -- each with her own order and timing -- of arching up with great tension; of lying on their backs with knees in the air, wriggling and jumping in that position. Suddenly one then another, then another hurls one straight leg over her own body and jams the foot on the floor, almost, but not quite, turning completely onto her stomach. The struggle is terrific. I imagine overturned turtles stranded by the tide, trying to right themselves. But (and here's one of those arbitrary elements that strikes me as puzzling) they can get up when they want to -- easily too. Now one woman can walk to another, bend over and extend a stiff arm; her recumbent comrade carefully places both her feet and both hands on that arm and the two stay locked in this intimate, functional position for a few moments. You sense a gentle tug between them, some kind of easing ritual.

The point here is not understated or blurred "dancing," as I think it was with Bowden or Dunas, but a full yielding to the demands of the movement at hand, no matter how ordinary it appears. (Kaye has worked with Simone Forti and has some of her unaffected sensuality.) Yet even within this context, some moments look right and others contrived. Yoshiko Chuma's clawing, curled-in-the-air jump is a miraculous example of fierce focus and dancerly skill used to produce a very pure image of animal intensity. Somewhat later Nina Lundborg goes into a fit of the same jumps while the other three wait; when she suddenly stops and sits down as if jolted from her excesses by their disapproval, the moment raises a host of cliches, not just from more traditional dances but from musical comedy.

The women play the way rabbits do, surprising each other with mid-air encounters, separate into pairs to crawl off to the corners like big cats. Monkeys now, they take turns throwing dirt in each other's faces (that's what the brown carpet is -- dirt). They can be bird-like too, picking their way along, stretching their arms. They edge up to each other in pairs, hike up their shirts and carefully; gravely touch bellies; it's a curious combination of a bonding rite and something fourth-graders might do.

Innocence and sophistication contrivance and natural flow mix disturbingly throughout this enigmatic work of Kaye's. At the very end, the women come to the strip of dirt by the audience's feet, kneel down, put their faces to the floor, and begin slowly heaping dirt on their heads. Its dust fills our nostrils. The act is powerfully disturbing, suddenly calling up Thebes and extremes of ritualized mourning, and many other things besides. But Pooh Kaye sits up and flashes us a grin; it's over, folks. And even at this point, I wonder how she can push something so perilous aside so easily.

Deborah Jowitt--