**‘American Smooth’: Dance Fever**

**The New York Times
November 21, 2004

By EMILY NUSSBAUM**
IN “American Smooth,” Rita Dove – Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, former poet laureate and competitive ballroom dancer – pulls the ultimate dance trick: she makes it look easy. An African-American woman married to a white German man, Dove has frequently written about the way social context can twist identity, and in an interview in American Poet last year she called dancing a corrective to her own shyness. “Egocentrism is the privilege of the dancing couple,” Dove said. “If I’m feeling shy, I never wear neutral colors – give me red or lime or turquoise!”

The best of these poems don’t sport quite such bold shades – they’re subtler and slyer than that – but they possess an elegant aggression all their own. For Dove, dance is an implicit parallel to poetry. Each is an expression of grace performed within limits; each an art weighted by history but malleable enough to form something utterly new. The title refers to Dove’s favored style, a variant that allows partners to separate on the floor, enabling a disciplined wriggle between intimacy and freedom.

Dove rhapsodizes about that wriggle – from a bawdy uncle’s “high-butt shenanigans” to the glorious moment a ballroom-dancing pair launches into flight, “before the earth / remembered who we were / and brought us down.” Such liberties don’t come without pain. In “Bolero,” the female dancer notes “How everything hurts! Each upsurge onto a throbbing toe, / the prolonged descent / to earth, / to him.” In the gorgeous “Rhumba,” the couple’s struggles become a wry, syncopated, unspoken dialogue – from mutual warnings (“Don’t close your eyes. / Don’t bend your knees”) to paranoia (“Whew! That’s over”) to playful encouragement (“C’mon, milk it, turn”) to a final climax of joyful, united abandon (“the audience / forget them”).

In other verses, Dove evokes the early-20th-century dance hall and its difficult history. In “The Castle Walk,” she suggests the thoughts of a black bandleader in 1915 as he sardonically kicks up an “Innovation Tango” to liven a fusty white crowd. In “Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove,” Dove dramatizes the entrance of that Oscar-winning actress into an all-white nightclub, “late, in aqua and ermine, gardenias / scaling her left sleeve in a spasm of scent, / her gloves white, her smile chastened, purse giddy / with stars and rhinestones clipped to her brilliantined hair, / on her free arm that fine Negro, / Mr. Wonderful Smith.”

In this scene, as in many others in the collection, glamour is two-faced: at once a mask and a form of resistance. (Standing out is a requirement, so one might as well make it count.) In “Brown,” for example, a white woman at a ballroom dance competition tells Dove her dark skin looks wonderful against her red dress. The comment leaves the poet feeling stung and self-conscious, musing that “the difference I cause / whenever I walk into a polite space / is why I prefer grand entrances – / especially with a Waltz, / that European constipated / swoon.”

At such moments, Dove pinpoints an intriguing blend of emotions: defiance, hurt, amusement and a prickly streak as well. But she is also a poet unashamed of simple sentiment, and in poems that memorialize a family trip to a drive-in movie in the 50’s, or recall the dignity of the Harlem Hellfighters (black heroes of World War I), her work has a more straightforwardly elegiac vibe. Such poems can feel dutiful, a simple recitation of facts. But when they hit on striking imagery – as when the returning soldiers step “right up white-faced Fifth Avenue in a phalanx . . . / past the Library lions, eyes forward, tin hats aligned – / a massive, upheld human shield” – these elegies connect with the reader as powerfully as do the more emotionally complex odes to dance.

A few of Dove’s personal reveries feel wispier, like the throwaway “Desk Dreams,” a series of odes to her working spaces. But in this strong collection, my favorites remain the dancing poems – and their analogue, the poems of domestic happiness. In one non-dance poem, Dove sweetly offers up a loving acknowledgment to those who may find this theme less than dramatic. In “Cozy Apologia,” she describes the way her subject matter drifts eternally to her husband, working separately in the same house. “We’re content,” she explains, “but fall short of the Divine. / Still, it’s embarrassing, this happiness – / Who’s satisfied simply with what’s good for us, / When has the ordinary ever been news?”

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