PUNK BALLERINA

There's a new star in the dance firmament. Karole Armitage, punk princess of the downtown scene, catapults uptown next month when her ballet for Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre premieres in Washington. Her fiancé, the hot young artist David Salle, is designing the sets. CRAIG BROMBERG reports

To music of bone-crunching intensity—prerecorded and then distorted snatches of classical themes overlaid with live drumming—Karole Armitage strides onto stages in New York or Paris or Seattle, arms akimbo, legs askew, cold, coltish, graceful. Her costume is someone's high-tech gladiator fantasy: long-sleeved black leotard and tights, fingerless black gloves, a head ornament that looks something like big black earmuffs, and—most bizarrely—black pointe shoes with leather tops that cover the instep and flare above the ankle. Punk toe shoes. When she bounds over to her partner, a twin vision in black ersatz armor, she strikes a classical arabesque, fencing him in behind her raised leg and placing him in a position that can only be called submissive. Then he pushes her off-balance, and the two warriors in this erotic battle begin their maneuvers, *The Watteau Duet*.

Karole Armitage seems to get a kick out of foisting the perverse and the risqué on unsuspecting audiences. You know this because of the way she raises her eyebrows before the jeté that precedes a bump-and-grind routine; you see it in the tilt of her head when she plays cat and mouse with her partner, Joseph Lennon, the way she lets him run from side to side, always *around* her, never allowing him to gain the upper hand. In one section of *The Watteau Duet* she stalks onstage wearing black patent stiletto high heels and lace stockings. Suddenly she is sitting on Lennon's back, riding him like a horse, then climbing onto his shoulders and clinging to him while upside down. There's no turning back now, and Lennon, dressed in a black leather skirt and snarling like a minor James Dean, knows it. He grabs Armitage by her ankles and drags her offstage. A moment later she cartwheels into view again, slyly drapes one of her stilettos over her shoulder, and gives the audience a wink of complicity.

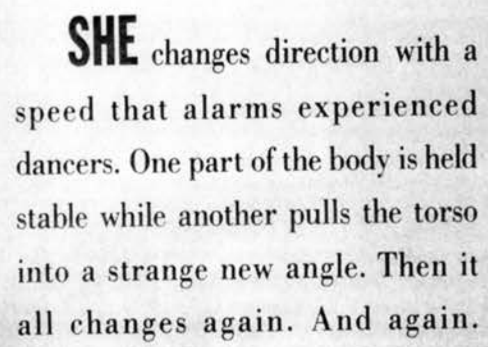
Karole Armitage is a nice American girl from Kansas who has for the last five years or so been the high priestess of punk choreography in New York's highly competitive experimental-dance scene. She actually appeared more often in Europe than in New York during those years (Europe has always embraced the American avant-garde more warmly than America does), but critics and serious dance-goers kept track of her. She has been well known as a gifted, technically brilliant dancer since the mid-seventies, when she was a member of Merce Cunningham's company.

Now Armitage is making a ballet for Mikhail Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre that will premiere at the Kennedy Center in Washington next month—a rather more stuffy venue than that of the "downtown" world of dance from which she seems to have escaped. It is called the "downtown" dance scene because most of the people who populate it live and work below New York's Fourteenth Street, but it is just as much a state of mind as it is of geography. The majority of dancers downtown spend most of their artistic careers working in nonprofit performance spaces that seat fewer than five hundred people: the Kitchen, or Dance Theater Workshop, or, in the punkish East Village, the Danspace

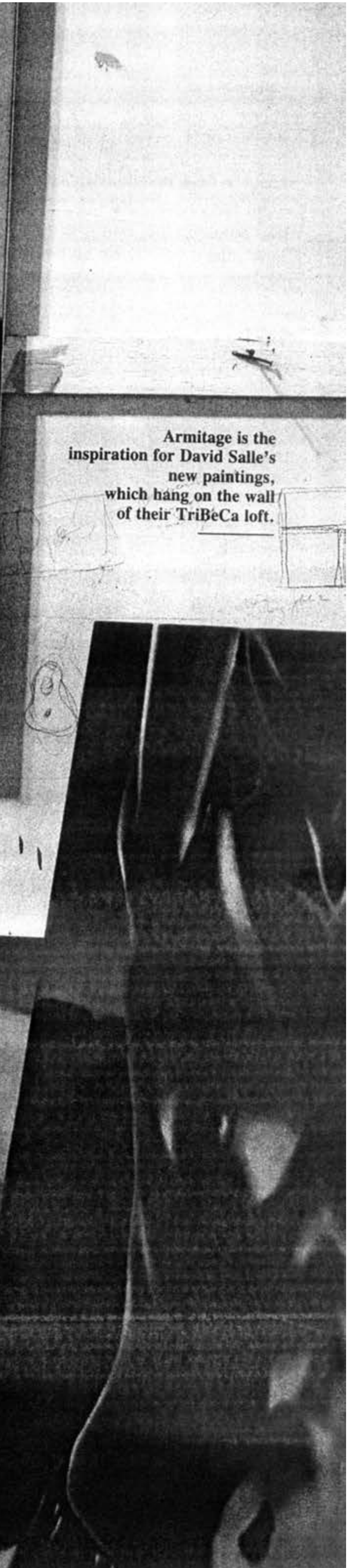
Photographs by BRUCE WEBER

Bromberg, Craig with photographs by Weber, Bruce "Punk Ballerina." Vanity Fair May 1986: 90-95, 128.

Karole Armitage jetés over downtown New York's asphalt, on her way uptown and out of town.



SHE changes direction with a speed that alarms experienced dancers. One part of the body is held stable while another pulls the torso into a strange new angle. Then it all changes again. And again.



Armitage is the
inspiration for David Salle's
new paintings,
which hang on the wall
of their TriBeCa loft.

Project at St. Mark's Church, or P.S. 122, a converted schoolhouse. Some of the graduates of this world have gone uptown or out of town before, but usually not so abruptly. Twyla Tharp was the first choreographer to make the journey. Trisha Brown and David Gordon—founding members of the radical dance movement that started at Judson Church in Greenwich Village in the early sixties and became known as "postmodern" dance—have emerged more recently.

Almost all of Armitage's American choreography was sponsored by the downtown scene, but in five fast years she has arrived uptown in a big way. A recent dinner party for eighty guests, hosted by balletomane Earle Mack for Armitage and her fiancé, painter David Salle—one of the art world's brightest young stars—is a case in point. Sitting in Salle's lavish fifties-style TriBeCa loft were Marian Javits, Jerome Robbins, American Ballet Theatre associate director John Taras, Leonard Stern (owner of the *Village Voice*), Cornelia Guest, and various other tastemakers. The party was held in celebration of the completion of Armitage's grueling two-month tour through Europe, but its unstated purpose was to raise several hundred thousand dollars for a Karole Armitage dance company. This is the way they do things uptown.

ARMITAGE herself never really thought she was a punk. It was the tarted-up costumes, the wild hair, the kinky presence that got her the tag.

Karole Armitage's dancing life began prosaically enough. When she was five her mother enrolled her in ballet classes. Armitage was a lot luckier than most little girls: her teacher was an ex–New York City Ballet dancer who had fled New York for Kansas, and soon Armitage was dancing in recital productions of Balanchine's *Gounod Symphony* and *Serenade*. In 1969, when she was fourteen, she was sent to the North Carolina School of the Arts for more training. But she was resistant. "The worst side of the ballet mentality," she says, "expects total unthinking submissiveness and distorts the reasons for technique into a kind of stupid rule-making. They encouraged the most anti-artistic side of dancing and I knew it."

As luck would have it, in 1971 her father, a research biologist, went to work in London for a year, and Armitage went with him. After only a few months she was plucked from a ballet class by Patricia Neary, who directed the Balanchine-dominated Geneva Ballet.

The rebellion started in earnest in Geneva. Armitage found once again that for her the traditional discipline of classical dance vitiated whatever artistic possibilities the classical tradition held within it. She hated sticking to the rules. She hated her corps roles. ("I couldn't stand being a droopy Wili.") After only a year she decided to leave Geneva for the lures of New York. "I decided to quit ballet forever and try modern dance," she says. "If I liked it I would stay, and if I didn't—well, that was the end of dance."

At first, New York seemed considerably less exciting than it was cracked up to be. Armitage found herself socially isolated and somewhat at a loss to learn the modern-dance vocabulary created by Merce Cunningham, the dance master at whose studio she was taking classes. His methods were radically different from the code of classical dance Armitage had followed since she was a child. Cunningham isolated dance movement from theatrical elements he claimed were

extraneous—music, stage design, narrative, even the choreographer himself. He wed his dancers to the floor in order to establish a strong center from which to move the body from shape to shape and rhythm to rhythm.

It took a few months of classes to adjust her body to Cunningham's way of moving, but the style soon became second nature. "This is the answer I've always been seeking," Armitage remembers thinking. "It was all I thought dance could be, both physically and rhythmically. The body was being used so logically and really so intelligently. It was a very personal and rigorous way of working, so opposite to my ballet training, and yet there was something so right about it."

Even though she had seen only two Cunningham performances by 1976, Armitage was asked to join the company. She stayed for five years, and Cunningham created a series of stunning roles for her. "I had a certain kind of refinement that came from ballet that is very different from the refinement of modern dance," Armitage recalls, "and I think Merce must have found that refreshing. It was obvious that I showed his choreography with a kind of clarity that had real *oomph* to it—and that wasn't always the case."

Just two years into dancing with Cunningham, however, Armitage once again began to feel confined, and she started making her own work. First came *Ne* (pronounced as in the French, *ne pas*), in 1978, a dance that contrasted silent poses with frenzied dancing and barrages of sound made by an early punk band called The The. Nearly a year later at the Kitchen she made and performed *Do We Could,* which consisted mostly of walking around without music. That was as close to "postmodern" dance as Armitage ever came.

In the summer of 1980, Armitage began both a personal and working relationship with Rhys Chatham, a classically trained composer who had been strongly influenced by punk music and was working with the electric guitar to create waves of highly amplified sound. *Vertige* (1980), the first piece they made together, was a work for solo dancer and solo guitar, performed in a local club. *Drastic Classicism,* shown at Dance Theater Workshop in 1981, with a six-member company and a live rock band, was the official start of Armitage's long journey back to ballet.

From the very beginning Armitage worked hard to find a way to make stylistic and technical opposites attract. If her leg was classically placed, an arm was thrown out of line. If the arms found their way into a conventional port de bras, the legs gnarled and the knees buckled. Instead of being up and stretched, Armitage slouched and bounced, throwing herself onto the other dancers. Disequilibrium was the constant antidote to the classical decorum that pervaded even Cunningham's work.

Her style was influenced also by the music she used. Armitage was fascinated by the Sex Pistols, and had found the punk scene a convenient way of acclimating herself to New York's often chilly social waters. "Punk was the rediscovery about what was thrilling about rock in the first place," she says now, albeit somewhat sheepishly. "It was simple and powerful, with a strong look and real style. When punk happened I realized that I could combine its sense of freedom and precariousness with the discipline of controlled sculptural shape and self-presentation."

Armitage married contemporary dance and pop without diminishing either one's importance. A beat ahead of or behind rock's steady 4/4, she could change direction with a speed that still alarms experienced dancers. One part of the body would be held stable while another would pull the torso into a strange new angle. Then it would all change again. And again. It was a totally different way of moving from shape to shape: sculpted and propelled. At the same time. Ironically, it was the wild and undisciplined musicians—placed onstage while she danced around them—who would lay down a grid (rock's quarter-beat dogma) as the dancers veered schizophrenically between punk pranksterism and classical romance.

Armitage herself never really thought she was a punk. It was the tarted-up costumes, the wild hair, the kinky presence that got her the tag. "To me, the theme of *Drastic Classicism* was the conflict between classical restraint—discipline, a means of self-presentation, even a way of living—and this spontaneous, rebellious, rock 'n' roll thing," she says. But many thought that Armitage was *attacking* the old classical values, showing their exhaustion. Others recognized a true classicist when they saw one. Arlene Croce proclaimed Armitage's choreographic prowess in *The New Yorker*. In Armitage's dances, she wrote, "classical values that were flayed alive stayed alive. Armitage seemed to be self-elected to guide classicism through the straits of punk rock, punk chic, and whatever else the youth culture had to offer."

In any case, *Drastic* had other things in it which were far more disturbing (and entertaining) than an attack on classical dance: themes of exotic sexuality, of dominance and submission, of love and death. Some of these still mark Armitage's dances. She has never been less than frank about her desire to put sexuality onstage. "From the very beginning I wanted to do things that had strong psychological and erotic content. I'm a great believer in the role of autobiography in art. Personality is so essential. *I* don't think it's just a bunch of ideas." Nor does she put herself onstage as a sexual object without extreme self-consciousness. "The sexuality has to be real, but you do it differently for performance," she says, "because the way that you read images in performance is quite different from real life."

Rhys Chatham saw it another way. "Rhys had a hard time divorcing the performing woman—an erotic object in front of an audience—from the personal being. He wanted me to be his *all the time*. He didn't like me being a 'sex object for the masses.' I couldn't believe it at first. I thought it was a joke, but when I realized it wasn't, I couldn't live with it very long."

In 1981, Armitage broke up with Chatham, left the Cunningham company—"I had been rehearsing six hours a day with Merce and five hours on my own and it just became too much"—and moved to France. When she returned, nearly a year later, with a piece titled *Paradise* (revised and shown again in New York in 1984), a none-too-successful attempt to play with narrative structure, it was obvious to her audience that something had changed quite drastically. Armitage signaled her intentions—a return *(Continued on page 128)*

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(Continued from page 95) to the classical tradition—when a pair of toe shoes were lobbed across the stage. She knelt down and put them on, then twirled off *en pointe*.

In the last three years, Armitage has received commissions from quite various segments of the dance world. Dance Theatre Workshop supported *The Watteau Duet* (which was originally given a title based on an unpronounceable physics equation); the Groupe de Recherche Chorégraphique de Paris, the modern-dance wing of the Paris Opera Ballet, asked her to make something for them; Baryshnikov invited her to A.B.T. She has created almost a dozen new works for dance companies from Tasmania to Paris.

There has been progress on other fronts also. For one thing, Armitage fell in love with David Salle, at thirty-three one of America's most successful young painters. "I'd always had romantic ideas of what it would be like to be in love with an artist," she says. They met backstage after a performance of the revised *Paradise* in January 1984, and although love was, according to both of them, "absolutely instantaneous"—"It was his cha-ris-ma," says Armitage, poking each syllable—it took at least one world tour and numerous messages through mutual friends before they finally came together.

"David is more independent, stronger, more self-reliant, and less filled with self-doubt than any of the men I've gone out with," she says. "He and I have similar tendencies to be analytical rather than to dive into an affair." But one look at the paintings hanging in his studio leaves no doubt who his current inspiration is.

Five years ago, Armitage seemed content to keep her audiences guessing which side of the coin she would come down on. Was she "drastic" or "classical"? Was she creating punk epitaphs for the demise of classical dance, or a neoclassical aesthetic that stole what it could from contemporary culture—advertising, discos, TV—without getting stranded on the other side? "My choreography has never been an attack on classicism so much as an extension of it," she declares now. "A surprise to the eye, a surprise that energizes the expressiveness of classical movement. It's getting to be distressing to me that people don't see it that way. Pop culture," she says, is "simply no longer an issue for me. The influence of pop is taken for granted in my work these days, but it's one influence among many. It could just as well be Watteau's paintings. Anyway, the mixture of high and low culture has been around so long, it's not even an idea anymore. Balanchine was doing it in the thirties."

"If you think about Karole's work in its entirety," David Salle says, "its beauty is that it has the capacity to reflect on life—which is what all classical art does. All the other impulses only add to the overall sense of classical structure. Classicism is not a look but an idea about how to use a structure."

Salle's relationship with Armitage is developing into an artistic collaboration as well. He is making sets not only for

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Armitage's A.B.T. piece but also for the new dance she will mount on her own company—currently titled *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler*, in honor of the great jazzman's rhythmic prowess. The A.B.T. work will be set to a score consisting of two different sections from Hindemith, a Nichols and May comedy routine, and some closing music by Peter Gordon. "It's a four-movement piece with eleven dancers, a metamorphosis in motion that's meant to be centered around Misha," she says. "It's a sort of fantasy about Misha's solitude, the awe-inspiring talent he has, the responsibility he has to shoulder, and the suspiciousness aroused by that amount of talent and power."

Baryshnikov first saw Armitage dance during the New York premiere of *The Watteau Duet* at D.T.W. last spring. "He came backstage and literally leapt through the door while I was in the shower, and he grabbed me and kissed me and said how much he loved everything about it and wondered how it was physically possible to do," Armitage remembers. One wonders how Baryshnikov so quickly decided that this quirky dancer in black punk pointe shoes would be able to cope with a great classical dancer and his big ballet company. But she had made "an unforgetta ble impression as a performer," Ba ryshnikov says, "and I was convince the energy and intelligence that sh brought to her own dancing she woul be able to bring to choreography f other people. . .I don't know what th ballet will be about, but as much as it about me and our dancers, it will als be about Karole."

"After doing *Drastic*," says Arm tage, "I decided that the greatest cha lenge and the richest field of endeav would be to do the real classic dance our time. I'm ecstatic. Now I'm almo getting to the point where I'm going be doing pure ballet. Well, maybe n 'pure.' " □