

Anticipation

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

Unfinished, underrehearsed, overmiked, and surely overcrowded on Alice Tully Hall's modest stage, *The Warrior Ant* was despite all shortcomings such a remarkable event that it's still reverberating in my ears and my mind weeks later. The experience Lee Breuer and Bob Telson propose for us is a daunting and gigantic one, worlds away from theater or art as we normally understand the words. This concert, where only the Prologue and Epilogue were given, was just a foretaste. Apart from daring to pull together artists and performance styles of the most divergent kinds, Breuer and Telson are trying to close the gap on what, in aesthetic terms, is the biggest divergence of all: The one between the artist's private vision and the audience's understanding. Though presented as a piece of music-theater to be sat through and watched on the usual terms, *The Warrior Ant* is in essence (maybe "larvally" would be the right word) not a performance but what the late Middle Ages called an *action theatrale*—a giant celebratory piece, epic in scope, for which the whole community gathers in the town square on a holiday and in which everyone is expected to bear some part in the proceedings. What the Breuer-Telson team proposes, in effect, is an *action*

theatrale for the global village.

The historic purpose of "actions" was religious: By reenacting the biblical narrative (they often extended from the Creation of Adam to the Crucifixion), they simultaneously bound the people in a social act with the Church, inculcated Christian doctrines, and taught the myths that exemplified them, which had not yet been translated into the vulgate. Though committed to a theater of mythic stature, Breuer and Telson are not religious doctrinaires—they aren't even Christians: Their explicit intention is to create nondenominational myths that cross all cultural lines, exploring the common elements in human life without benefit of dogma. In place of the mythic half-god Christ, sent down to die for our sins, and his mythic predecessors, the Bacchus and Osiris torn apart by our wicked frenzy, Breuer offers the lowliest, most ordinary and anonymous of nonhuman creatures—the ant.

This heroic nonhero, as far as one could tell from the excerpts presented, doesn't commit any act that might have sectarian symbolic weight, like intoxicating his followers or taking on the burden of world sin. Instead he lives through an insect life-cycle, carefully contrived by Breuer to analogize with a human indi-

vidual's spiritual odyssey. In the prologue the ant is sired, in a surge of impulse and erotic longing, by a termite-drone who will afterwards die, on a virgin queen in flight. (Breuer's metaphors mingle, with puckish arbitrariness, the traits of ants, moths, bees, and other insects.) After many adventures—the piece is planned as a long cycle rather than a one-night performance—the ant in the epilogue achieves apotheosis and death by climbing to the top of a giant redwood tree and mating with a "death moth," in whose embrace he dies in turn, while creating another ant to follow him.

Clearly, *The Warrior Ant* is meant to be both comically absurd in its pettiness (like its 1920s predecessor, Karel Capek's *Insect Comedy*) and magnificent in summing up the basic instincts of life. Just as the ant's story contains every kind of insect, the staging and Telson's music employ a patchwork of styles and techniques from all over. The critic who complained about the music not being molded into a unified whole missed the point, which is to effect a communality by having every style make its own contribution—a musical progressive dinner, not a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Telson's own band, Little Village, provided a pop-rock core for the evening. It was overlaid first with rain-forest percussion effects as the mating urge grew; then an emblematic banner was whisked away to reveal on an upper platform the erotic upsurge of a samba band (the Empire Loisaida Escola de Samba) in full flight. The prologue was brought to a heady climax with drumming of a steadily increasing intensity, first from a Puerto Rican

percussion, or *bomba*, band (Los Pleneros de la 21), then from Olatunji's African Drums of Passion, and finally from all four bands in a deafening, exhilarating unison that must have made every building in Lincoln Center pulsate. Much of the narration, which alternated Olatunji with downtown performers like Ron Vawter and Ruth Maleczech, got lost in the delightful bedlam, but its intention was palpable in the music.

The epilogue brought out an artistic conjunction even more astonishing than the massed bands. Here, to a mixture of Telson's group and traditional Japanese theater music on tape, Breuer's Ant and Moth were represented by a samurai and a demon-princess puppet from the Bunraku, manipulated by a master, Yoshida Tamamatsu, with a dazzling cascade of details, in such shenanigans and cavortings as no Bunraku puppet has ever been seen doing; the climax was an apotheotic, uninhibited cha-cha. Far from being a vulgarization of this highly traditionalized, state-protected art form, the dance seemed like a transcendence, exactly the kind of mythic merging that lies behind these projects of Breuer's. He wants to go back to the primal roots of theater, to drive it back into public ritual while pouring the quirkiness of an individual artist's vision into it; he wants to script our mythos, and write in a part for every human alive. For what is, so far, a limited audience, his astonishing marriages of disparate elements produce great joy. How much further he can convey it remains to be seen. For now I'm just glad that the public for his extraordinary ventures includes me. ■