

Stretch Work: From Young To Old(er)

By GIA KOURLAS

ON the surface Jonah Bokaer is nearly ethereal, with brown eyes that melt and a tendency to speak in near-whispers. But when he laughs — hearty and devilish — a more tangible side shines through: it's as if Mr. Bokaer, 29, is an old man stuck in a young person's body.

His apparent meekness isn't timidity but armor. Mr. Bokaer's accomplishments are ample: He joined the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at 18, the youngest dancer the company hired, and remained for eight years. He's choreographed his own dances as well as the operas of Robert Wilson. And he was instrumental in the formation of two arts spaces in Brooklyn, Chez Bushwick and the Center for Performance Research.

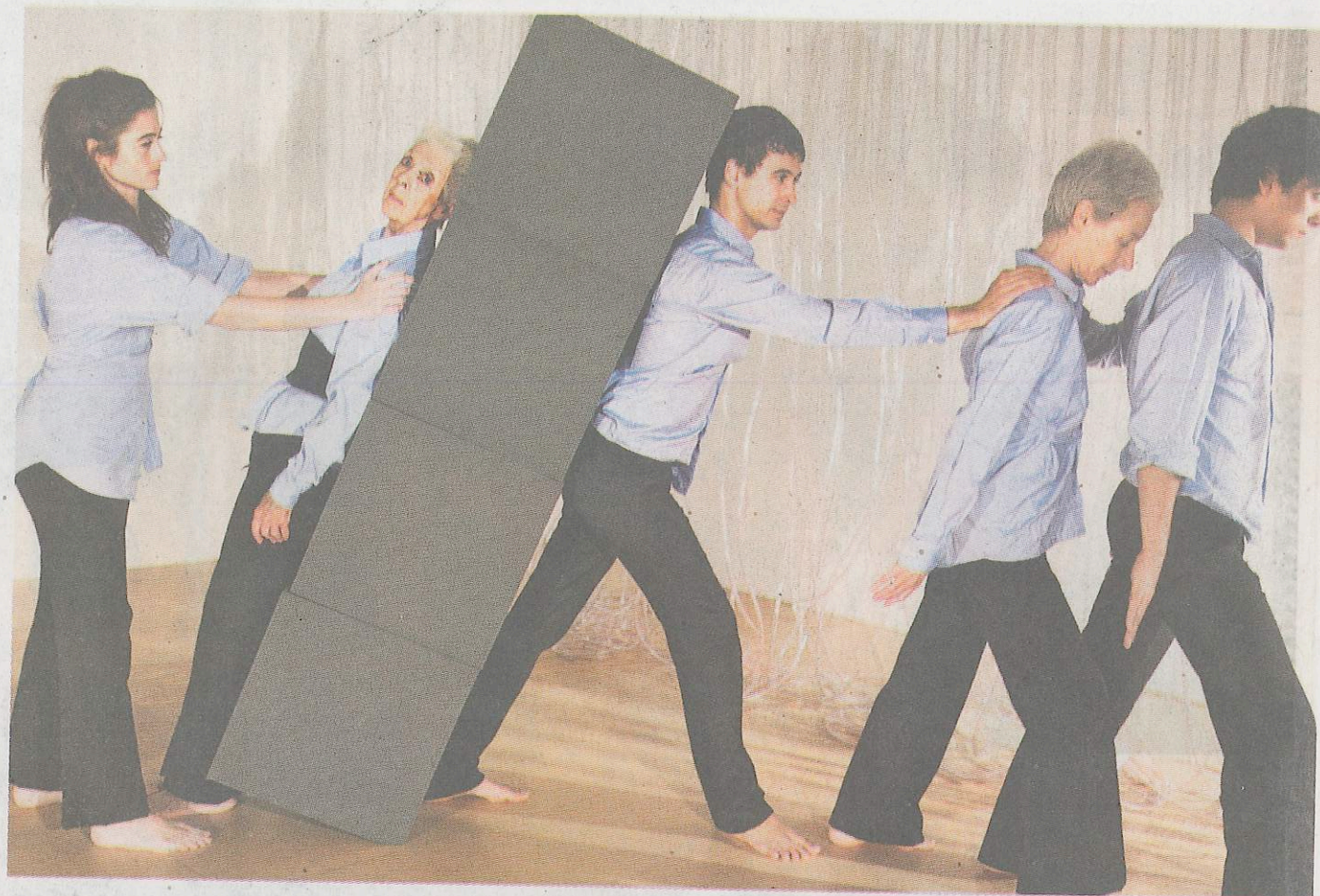
In his new work, "Anchises," a collaboration with the design group Harrison Atelier that will open at the Abrons Arts Center on Nov. 17, Mr. Bokaer focuses on the relationship between the young and the old by way of Greek mythology. Inspired by the image of the elderly Anchises being carried on the shoulders of his son Aeneas from a burning Troy, the multifaceted production is anchored by two former Cunningham dancers: Meg Harper, who is in her mid-60s, and Valda Setterfield, in her mid-70s.

"Anchises" isn't Mr. Bokaer's first experience involving senior dancers. For Mr. Wilson's "Kool — Dancing in My Mind," which paid tribute to the dance artist Suzushi Hanayagi, who has Alzheimer's, he worked with Ms. Harper and Sally Gross, a Judson-era dancer and choreographer. In "Prayer & Player," created for Paradigm, an ensemble of mature dancers including Ms. Setterfield, he showed an uncanny sensitivity for making an aging body appear anything but frail.

The seeds of "Anchises" were planted during a visit to Pavilion Dance, a center in Bournemouth, England, where there was the possibility of Mr. Bokaer creating a new work. He learned of a challenge regarding an audience: the town's population was largely made up of retirees.

"That led me to realize my own interaction with the elderly in dance," Mr. Bokaer said. "The topic is so enormous. What do we do with the aging? But not

Performing in Jonah Bokaer's "Anchises," which draws on Greek mythology to consider what one generation owes another, are, from left, Catherine Miller, Valda Setterfield, Mr. Bokaer, Meg Harper and James McGinn.



JULIETA CERVANTES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

only that. What do we do with the aging particularly in dance?"

While "Anchises" isn't restricted to that topic — it also explores the tension between progress and compassion — for Ms. Harper the experience has been life altering. "Jonah has really brought me back as a dancer," she said. "He's gotten me interested in training again and that kind of goes along with one of the themes of the piece, which is transformation."

Even the set addresses an aspect of aging, the question of institutionalizing the elderly. The design group's Seth Harrison and Ariane Lourie Harrison, who serve as dramaturges, have created a milieu that hints at hospitals and nursing homes in the form of a hanging structure made of medical tubing.

In the work the younger dancers — Mr. Bokaer, Catherine Miller and James McGinn — join Ms. Harper and Ms. Setterfield, and they shift among three characters: Anchises, Aeneas and Ascanius, a young child. He also blurs gender, calling the idea of masculine and feminine into question. "It was very important to me," he said, "to dodge any literal retreading of this topic."

But the characters do at times remind him of people in his life. He recalled an experience during the New York City blackout of 2003: He was rehearsing a solo and Cunningham, oblivious to the commotion,

just kept working. Eventually the company manager stopped the rehearsal, and Mr. Bokaer and Cédric Andrieux, another dancer, carried Cunningham down 11 flights of stairs.

"He was sitting and he had his arms around us," Mr. Bokaer said. "It was kind of like that image of Anchises, when the young are porting the old out of the burning city."

Mr. Bokaer readily admits that he is drawn to the elderly; it probably has something to do with his upbringing in Ithaca, N.Y. His parents' extended families lived within a two-block radius. "It was very unusual," he said, laughing. "I really had four grandmothers: two by blood, one from my father's previous marriage and then an honorary grandmother."

His father is Tunisian, and his mother, who is Welsh-Scottish, grew up in a theater family in Akron, Ohio. Mr. Bokaer's grandfather Arthur Lithgow, was an actor and director, and his uncle is the actor John Lithgow. In Ithaca his mother still directs. "She mainly does cultural revisions of Shakespeare," he said. "She did a version of 'The Tempest' which was about colonialism in the Caribbean." Mr. Bokaer flashed a grin. "I think there's a theater gypsy in me for sure."

Forging his own path has been a driving force for him. "The child caring for the par-

ent is a big topic," he said. "My father went bankrupt when I was growing up, and I think that's a part of why I was like: 'All right, I'm going to leave home, pay for the education, get the scholarship. I've got to make this work.' I don't think it's in the piece, but it's maybe what drew me to it."

Ms. Setterfield said that Mr. Bokaer's ability to make things work no matter the circumstance fills her with a degree of awe. "The thing that's very impressive about Jonah is that physically and verbally he can make something amazingly clear," she said. "That's sort of gorgeous and totally surprising because you think he's drowning in whatever he's dealing with."

Throughout the process she observed how Mr. Bokaer's hectic schedule made him distant, but during a performance of "Anchises" in England they had a moment onstage. She saw the fog lift.

Before that show Mr. Bokaer had explained to the cast there were no frozen moments in the piece — that the dancers were, above all, human.

"In the middle of a section he reached up and tweaked my collar," Ms. Setterfield said. "So I fixed his button and he sort of almost smiled. I thought, 'Oh, Jonah, you're coming back.' I don't remember what it was like to be 29, but he's bearing a huge burden, and he's doing it quite spectacularly."