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Wave Hill—Sara Pearson's Common Ground

Tucked into the northwest corner of Riverdale, Wave Hill is a little tricky to get to. But whenever you do get there, you wonder why you don't come more often. And if you're a New Yorker, it does belong to you, your very own Hudson River estate.

Dancing in the Street's Dances For Wave Hill provides the perfect excuse to head for the estate. 1993 was their third year, with three programs, each on a Wednesday evening and a Saturday afternoon. Once there you can enjoy the lush, imaginatively planted gardens, the sweeping lawns, huge trees, and grand vistas. Hustle and bustle seem very far away. And wherever there is dancing—the sites vary—you look at the land before you in a new way.

For *Common Ground*, conceived and directed by Sara Pearson for Sara Pearson—Patrik Widrig and Company, with music by Robert Een and for the concert of Een's music that preceded *Common Ground*, the audience moved to a lawn in front of the house, next to a huge copper beech tree. We faced the northeast corner of the estate, with an arbor of the extensive gardens uphill to the south (the musicians were on this rise) and roads to the north and east obscured by trees and shrubs.

The four musicians performed four agreeable pieces by Een, "Caravan," "Big Joe A La Turk," "A Year Ago Yesterday," and "Eddie's Dead." They seemed to mix composed stretches and improvisation in a jazzy manner to rhythms variously Middle Eastern, bluesy, and R&Bish, driven by percussionist Hearn Gadbois' dumbek. Robert Een's cello sometimes sang out and sometimes took the place of a bass. Steve Elson on soprano and baritone sax added infectious and commanding Middle Eastern, jazz, funk, and R&B riffs. Completing this unusual mix of

instruments was Carter Burwell's accordion—never a jolly or rollicking accordion, but often a discordant and sometimes a draggy one.

A line of washtubs set off the dancing ground. Before things seemed quite to have started, came long, mournful jazz lines from a saxophone hidden under the enormous beech. Looking, one could glimpse dancers standing on chairs under the encompassing tree.

With a drum roll and cello and accordion from the rise, the saxophonist emerged and walked toward the other musicians. The tree shook—it could have been the wind, but dancers were helping.

Six dancers in yellow and orange carry woks at their shoulders like ritual vessels or kalixes on a Greek vase. These six, Carlo Adinolfi, Andrea Kline, Karin Levitas, Sara Pearson, Mary Sonntag, and Patrik Widrig, make their own shapes as they stand in the woks and shift weight and move slowly. They get up and run on the lawn or up the rise or back to the woks, individually or in a line, or crouch and slowly rise or fall over and roll.

But this is not a dance of steps and the movements in the center field are not what is compelling about the piece. Instead, like the dancer-aided rustling of the trees, it's what we see or sense peripherally that gives the piece shape. Six additional dancers provide this peripheral border. First I noticed a woman in bright orange-yellow moving slowly along the trees and shrubs towards a bench at the northeast corner, her costume echoing the yellow lilies near it. Later two men in white and three women in purple, red, and green shifts with contrasting tights approach the corner. The three women climb on the bench as the woman in yellow had before them, while the men in white pass them. The music shifts—there are Latin rhythms and Middle Eastern ones, among others.

The six yellow and orange co-creator dancers come to the washtubs, fill their woks with water and pour it out, onto the ground, and into the tubs. The six throw their water into the air in unison, making lovely fractal patterns with their splashes. Everyone in the audience is smiling as they do it again and again. The soprano saxophone wails wildly. The six seem to throw their water at the audience. As they walk away slowly with the woks posed on their shoulders, the wonderfully rhythmic music is fast and furious with drum beats, and cello like a bass, and Elson wondrously wailing.

There is a sense of procession about *Common Ground* and a sense of mystery to the six peripheral dancers who appear in unexpected places. The woks in the guise of ritual vessels are an excellent prop. Water is a part of many rituals. We all love streams and waterfalls and the lure of water is irresistible on a hot day. The splashes provided an enjoyable sense of climax and closure. Above all, it was the timing and the use of space—both predictable, because patterned, and surprising, that produced a sense of ritual mystery.

Common Ground was co-commissioned with Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors, where it was given (without the excellent Elson) under the trees, beside the benches and flowerbeds of Damrosch Park. I thought I should go out of professional curiosity, but really wasn't tempted. Wave Hill's calm green loveliness added so much to the piece that it was hard to imagine it being as successful amid concrete and crowds.

Like a fabric with a common ground and an interesting border, this piece's center—the dances of the six on woks and up and down the rise—was less intriguing than the edges—the rustling in the trees, the slow procession in the distance, the climactic splashings of water from the ritual woks.