

MARTHA BOWERS

DANCE • THEATRE • ETCETERA

the village
VOICE

Tug of War

BY LOIS DRAEGIN

MARTHA BOWERS DANCE/THEATER/ETCETERA.
At the Field at Pineapple Dance Center (March
20 to 22). *Blue Heaven*, *Martial Dances*, and *In
Calm Recline*.

Martha Bowers's carefully crafted dances are at their sharpest when they investigate the uneasy truce people must reach when they share power. At first, *Blue Heaven* seems to pit its two women in a romantic triangle, both vying for the attention of one man. Scot Willingham, in a black-and-white graffitied suit, sits next to an antsy, frizzle-haired moppet (Clare Maxwell). He calms her down. A third chair stands empty. When the second woman (Florence Benevento) enters, his eyes are drawn to her. The three pace around the chairs, changing partners in percussive, vertical arrangements. Maxwell demands Willingham's attention—playfully, competitively, flinging herself upon the attentive but exasperated man. He divides his time between the two, casting doleful looks at Benevento while taming Maxwell.

It becomes clear that this is not your typical love triangle: Willingham must be daddy, Maxwell his child, and Benevento his love interest—an intruder. The flirtatious, sinuous duets of the "adults" are invariably broken up by the petulant child. Finally the two grab a moment of solitude, lying languidly on the floor, but the second they let down their guard Maxwell scuttles between them. The women have their confrontation: a quickly shifting push-and-pull in which Benevento finally asserts herself by taking hold of Maxwell, who, almost in spite of herself, gives into the other woman's grip. The domestic drama ends in a draw, an unresolved moment of silence, all three sitting alone in their separated chairs.

The power Bowers considers in *Martial Dances* is woman power. Two all-female clans populate the piece—four martial artists and four dancers—and with their sharply contrasting styles they bring up questions of strength and weakness, gentleness and force, in addition to providing a fascinating span of theatrical movement. The martial artists, dressed in loose, black karate outfits, are in deep concentration as they slowly punch the air, lunge, and expel grunts fit to terrify a predator. The dancers, who switch from sweats to pink tulle skirts and sashes, are ballerinas manqué, gamboling to Mozart's *German Dances*. They leap and swoop between the martial artists, like sprites among a formation-shifting, scissor-kicking A-Team. Against the elegant and formal music the incongruity is humorous. At one point a grunt and lunge match the music's hesitation. But something's out of balance if women can be only strong or weak, as this movement and attitude contrast suggests. At the end, a token resolution is reached when a dancer is tentatively guided from behind in the martial arts moves: the power is shared.