

# The New York Times

## Arts & Leisure

Sunday, June 9, 2002

DANCE

JENNIFER DUNNING

## No Longer Defenseless, Dance Finds an Advocate

**Y**OU could almost hear the collective thud of sinking hearts when the first announcements of the new Jazz at Lincoln Center complex were made two years ago. What about modern dance, that other indigenous American art form? It badly needs a theater of its own, with a seating capacity large enough for performances by major dance troupes. And why was dance hardly mentioned as a possible use for the jazz theater on dark nights?

Some things have changed since then. The Joyce Theater in Chelsea has been prominently mentioned as a possible participant in the planning of an arts complex at the World Trade Center site. The Joyce has for several years been searching for a site or an existing building for a 900-seat theater for dance. Such a theater could be part of the downtown project.

Last week, a promising lobbying effort began when a national dance service organization called Dance USA announced the opening of Dance/NYC in Manhattan. Robert Yesselman, the director of Dance/NYC, maintains that dance, which played important role in the city's culture in the 20th century, must make itself heard more clearly. Some 400 dance companies, of every aesthetic stripe, are at work in the five boroughs. Dance/NYC aims to give them a unified voice.

"New York is the dance capital of the world," Mr. Yesselman said. "The whole world knows of the centrality of New York to dance." With one exception, he added: New York City itself has little inkling of its importance to the history and production of dance throughout the world.

It all started with "the George and Martha story," Mr. Yesselman said: after George Balanchine and Martha Graham, "no one danced the same." First came Graham. In the late 1920's, working out of a studio on

---

**The descendants of Balanchine and Graham have gone on the offensive, acquiring a lobby to speak up for their interests.**

---

Ninth Street just east of Fifth Avenue, she developed and codified what we know today as modern dance. Nearly a decade later, Balanchine arrived and settled into a studio in an old building at Madison Avenue and 59th Street, where Isadora Duncan had once worked. His patron, Lincoln Kirstein, had intended to open a school in Hartford. It had to be in New York, Balanchine told Kirstein. And it was here that he began to create a new-looking, American kind of classical ballet.

From the start, there have been problems that kept dance from fulfilling that potential. Balanchine, for the most part, kept a distance from his dancers emotionally and disdained excess. "Just do it," he told them, well before Nike thought up the slogan. But Graham's companies often resembled dysfunctional families. Without emotional pain, there could be little or no artistic gain.

That attitude set the pattern for modern-dance companies. It also made it easier for dancers and their profession to be overlooked by a culture that believes work is validated only by pay. Who could take seriously workers who subsidized their art by performing for pittance or for nothing? Early reviewers recognized that it would be a struggle for modern dance to survive and flourish in competition with the more glamorous, safely European art form of classical ballet. And so they tried to help, be-



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

Robert Yesselman is director of Dance/NYC.

coming advocates for a sometimes tiresomely fragile-seeming art. The smell of need settled into the flesh and bones of modern dance.

And there was a larger, inherent cultural problem for all dance forms in America. From Isadora Duncan's first near-naked gambols, the exposure of the body in dance has offended or worried a Puritanical nation. Immodesty had the delicious taint of sin on the burlesque stage but not in the concert halls. Then there was the problem of the insubstantiality of dance. In drama there are words. In music there is a score you can hold in your hands. Sculpture is three-dimensional. Paintings feature figures, recognizable or not, that do not flee from the

field of vision.

Dance frightens some new dancegoers, who tend to worry about "understanding" the leg stretched out into an arabesque or the torso wrenching inward in a Graham contraction. Sadly, marketing sometimes plays right into those fears. What could the New York City Ballet have been thinking, for instance, when it described certain weekend matinees as "family friendly"? (On a happier note, once reluctant men in City Ballet audiences now volubly explain to the women accompanying them the intricacies of the performance they're watching, having awakened, it appears, from their fabled torpor at the ballet.)

**B**UT now, Mr. Yesselman contends, dance may be more ready to fight for its place at the table, in part because an increasingly bad economy has driven dance to catch up with the other arts. Dance/NYC is responding with a Web site aimed at audiences and dance professionals.

The Web site — [dancenyc.org](http://dancenyc.org) — includes up-to-date information on dance and dance-related events in the five boroughs, with links to sites for individual companies. Dance/NYC has created temporary sites for troupes that do not have their own. There are also mini-interviews and lively chunks of dance history tied to the places in New York City where they occurred.

Another site lists available rehearsal and performance spaces in the city. Members will receive regular e-mail messages about new grants and corporate projects. Dance/NYC has also commissioned a survey on the economic impact of the dance industry on the city. It intends to show how much money is spent by dance organizations and audiences and how that money is spent by the people who receive it.

The Joyce began to work with arts lobbyists three years ago. Linda Shelton, the executive director of the Joyce and a member of the Dance/NYC advisory committee, found that some of the mystery was taken out of the process of working with city and state governments. Dealing with politicians and finding new donor sources began to get a little easier. "They get our name out to people in the political world that we might not know even exist," Ms. Shelton said. "And they don't necessarily know that we exist." That may be changing. □