

Arts & LEISURE

The New York Times

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

| DANCE |

Baroque Holds Court for a New Age

By ROSLYN SULCAS

GROUNDED movement. Improvisation. An emphasis on curved forms rather than long, balletic lines. All these principles were explained in a recent class taught by Ani Udovicki at the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn. But the 20 students watching her intently were not taking a class in contemporary technique. They were learning the fundamentals of Baroque dance, a form that might be politely classified as a niche interest even in the dance world.

Still, it is a niche interest with a devoted band of followers. Like the field of early music, what might be called early dance is contentious and passionate terrain.

Even the label is problematic, said Catherine Turocy, the director of the New York Baroque Dance Company, which will present three events in New York in September and October under the umbrella title "Urban Baroque."

"We got stuck with the term in the 1970s," she said. "But the definition for the Baroque period is different in various countries, so I like to say that we do late 17th- and early 18th-century dance."

Even so, the company derives much of its repertory from French Baroque dances. Many of them were recorded in an efficient and detailed form of dance notation mostly developed by the choreographer and balletmaster Raoul-Auger Feuillet, whose treatise "Chorégraphie, ou L'Art de Décrire la Danse," published in 1700, was soon translated into English. (It was popular enough to cause a clergyman to complain that young ladies of the court were keeping dance manuals rather than Bibles on their bedside tables.)

Ms. Udovicki, one of the New York Baroque Dance members who teach the monthly classes, handed out pages of the Feuillet notation to the students, who ranged in age from around 20 to more than 60, before guiding them through a simple minuet, accompanied by a musician playing a Baroque violin. "Look how beautiful it is," she said animatedly of the notation. "If you continue with Baroque dance, you will learn to read it."

The dances recorded in Feuillet notation are clearly the precursors of classical ballet: legs are turned out from the hips, the torso is held upright, and many steps still bear the same names. The movement, however, has a delicate, understated precision; a low center of gravity, which pulls the dynamic down to the ground, in contrast to ballet, which tries to create the illusion of levitation; and filigreed, ornamental arms that make it recognizably of another place and time.

But while early-music practitioners have period instruments to play their scores on, dancers have only their 21st-century bodies and must rely on written descriptions, art and literature of the period for clues to style and manner.

"I think we move in a much more lush way because of modern dance," said Patricia Beaman, who will perform the solo "Accumulating Venus," based on Anthony L'Abbé's 1725 "Passacaille de Vénus et Adonis," on the company's "Points of Departure" program at the Morris center over the next two weekends. "For exam-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROYUKI ITO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ple, performers in the 18th century would never have shown their teeth, but we do smile. And we are much more turned out than they were. But if we were to try to rectify all of these kinds of things, we'd take the life out of the piece."

Ms. Turocy said the danger of remaining "in a historical ghetto" was the reason she decided, with "Points of Departure," to create a program that would reinterpret, or reimagine, Baroque choreography rather than offer period pieces. (For a company benefit on Oct. 1, and Opera Lafayette's production of "Zelindor, Roi des Sylphes" on Oct. 17, the company will exercise its more usual historical mandate.)

"What we do can also be a hotbed of inspiration for new choreography," Ms.

Back before ballet, a French style of movement inspired notation and centuries of devotees.

Turocy said. "These dances contain expressive elements that can really give depth to a contemporary technique. Dancers who have been working in the historical realm are in a better place to make a sophisticated artistic statement because they know these treasures from the past."

In addition to creating a new work of her

own for the program, "Caprice," Ms. Turocy commissioned pieces from four choreographers: Austin McCormick, Seth Williams, Ms. Beaman and Sarah Edgar. All except Mr. McCormick, have performed with Ms. Turocy, but they are also modern dancers and choreographers who believe that early dance could have a wider audience than it currently enjoys.



"Baroque is considered a bit fringe in the dance world," said Mr. McCormick, whose own troupe, Company XIV, will dance alongside the New York Baroque Dance Company members in his "Trompe-l'Oeil," based on two solos by Feuillet. "Once people try it, though, they usually have a newfound respect for the form. It's theatrical, you have to act, and it's very difficult technically. There is a lot of information there that is helpful for dancers."

How to persuade dancers and audiences alike that Baroque can — like classical ballet — have an appeal that is broader than its historical niche is a question Ms. Turocy has long considered. She founded the New York Baroque Dance Company with Ann Jacoby in 1976, and over the last three decades she has resolutely worked — frequently with her husband, James Richman, who directs the Concert Royal music ensemble — to make the form popular. With "Points of Departure," which mostly uses contemporary scores and costumes, she hopes to reach beyond the aficionados.

"We get all kinds of people who show up wanting a Disneyland experience," said Mr. Williams, who has also danced with Mark Morris and Sean Curran, and whose new piece, "Point of Departure," uses a minimalist composition by Daniel Becker scored for period instruments. "But we're trying to make this something that's living, not in its own theme-park world."

Above, a scene from "Point of Departure." Far left, Ani Udovicki, teaching baroque dance, is assisted by Patricia Beaman.