

THEATER REVIEW | 'COME FLY WITH ME'

The Chairman Sings, as Couples Swing

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ATLANTA — The popularity of television’s ballroom dancing competitions might have spread the idea that serious swinging on the floor is easy work. All that’s required today, you might gather, is a smidgen of fame (or infamy) and a total disregard for your dignity. With those requirements in hand, you too could be slouching through a tango on national television.

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John Selya, background, Holley Farmer and Matthew Dibble performing in “Come Fly With Me” at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta.

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Greg Mooney

Keith Roberts and Karine Plantadit during a scene from “Come Fly With Me,” directed and choreographed by Twyla Tharp.

A sharp corrective to this dubious belief can currently be seen at the Alliance Theater here, where “Come Fly With Me,” the exhilarating new [Twyla Tharp](#) musical set to the songs of [Frank Sinatra](#), is having its

premiere. The gifted performers pairing up and pairing off in this romantic fantasy prove with each sweep of an arm and lift of a leg that exhibition dancing of any kind is best practiced by highly trained professionals. It should go without saying that an artist of Sinatra’s stature deserves no less.

Ms. Tharp has made dances to pop music of all kinds in her long career as a choreographer, blending jazz, modern and classical vocabularies in exciting new ways. “Movin’ Out,” her Broadway show set to the songbook of [Billy Joel](#), was a major hit, and her [Beach Boys](#) romp, “Deuce Coupe,” is a defining classic of the 1970s. Ms. Tharp’s 2006 Broadway foray into the discography of [Bob Dylan](#), on the other hand, was a quick fizzle; she seemed more inhibited than inspired by that folk-rock master’s celebrated music.

Ms. Tharp, who directed and choreographed “Come Fly With Me,” has a fruitful history with Sinatra, so the show represents both a return to form and to safe ground. Although little of the choreography Ms. Tharp created for “Nine Sinatra Songs,” her 1980s ballet to his music, which was later revised as “Sinatra Suite,” appears in the new show, the inspiration she finds in his songbook rarely flags in this two-hour medley of dances loosely tied to vignettes about the emotional give and take among four couples at a nightclub.

In “Movin’ Out” Ms. Tharp used a Billy Joel sound-alike accompanied by a live band. But a Sinatra mimic? Too Las Vegas. The phrasing, the sensitivity to lyrics, the emotional timbre in the voice are so ingrained in the memory banks of many that to use an imitator would court derision. Instead the show employs Sinatra’s actual recordings, supplemented by an ample onstage band of 16 musicians — mostly brass and woodwinds — who play along, recreating the famous orchestrations by Nelson Riddle, Gordon Jenkins, Billy May and others. (The strings come from the recordings.)

It’s a curious blend, made a little more curious by the inclusion of the vocalist Dee Daniels, who sings solo on a few songs and duets with Sinatra on one number. But it works beautifully. Ms. Tharp used recordings in her previous Sinatra pieces, but a two-act ballet set to canned music would make for an undernourished evening on Broadway, where “Come Fly With Me” is hoping to land eventually. The music making is exemplary, with the warm live brass solos adding a particularly nice touch. Aficionados who can recognize each beat in each Sinatra recording may blanch (Will Friedwald, for instance), but most audiences will feel that the Chairman has been treated with the respect he deserves.

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Which is not to say that Ms. Tharp is afraid to cut loose. Wisely, she rarely tries to use the songs as literal templates for dancing, matching gesture to lyric. The texture of the sound — the mood — in each song dictates the style and flavor of the dancing, which is a heightened, more acrobatic form of ballroom strongly infused with the vocabulary of classical ballet.

For the leading roles Ms. Tharp has gathered a terrifically gifted troupe of performers, most of whom have worked with her before, including longtime collaborators like John Selya and Keith Roberts, the male stars of “Movin’ Out.” The notable newcomer is Holley Farmer, an acclaimed dancer with the [Merce Cunningham](#) company stepping into heels onstage for the first time. (I should note here that she is an acquaintance.)

Ms. Farmer plays a boa-wrapped seductress who arrives on the arm of one man, soon sets her sights on another, and eventually sets hearts fluttering all around. In “Witchcraft” men swoon as she passes and roll beneath her feet, while Ms. Farmer, entrancing in her cool poise, strides toward the man of her destination, then forsakes him to tease and flirt with the others.

Ms. Farmer comes out of a dance vocabulary that accentuates stillness and inwardness in a way that Ms. Tharp’s choreography does not. And “Come Fly With Me” is a jubilantly extroverted show, with the dancers often playing up to the audience. But Ms. Farmer’s precision and committed attack can be breathtaking, and her elusive presence befits the role of mystery muse.

In Mr. Selya she has a partner who embodies the Tharp style perhaps better than any dancer today. “Teach Me Tonight,” in the second act, finds them both at their best, and Mr. Selya’s solo to “The September of My Years,” all sweeping movement and open-armed yearning, is an affecting highlight of the first act, another occasion on which Ms. Tharp matches movement to mood perfectly.

Karine Plantadit is the flamboyant foil to Ms. Farmer’s restrained femme fatale. A fiercely strutting dancer with immense charisma, she radiates the ferocious intensity of a panther on the prowl. (At times she looks as if she wanted to devour the audience.) Ms. Plantadit is paired with Mr. Roberts in a tempestuous, on-again, off-again romance.

The evening’s electrifying showstopper is their antagonistic pas de deux about the allure of defiance, performed to “That’s Life.” Much of the choreography comes from Ms. Tharp’s earlier foray into the Sinatra oeuvre, but it is still sensational, a heated sexual tug of war that finds Mr. Roberts flinging his partner around with unrestrained violence as the song rolls to its punchy climax.

Charlie Neshyba-Hodges and Laura Mead are the innocents among the sophisticates. He’s a busboy at the club who falls head over heels (literally) for Ms. Mead’s ingénue in a frilly pink dress with a demure bow at the neck. Mr. Neshyba-Hodges is a skillful comic, and he makes getting airborne seem as easy as brushing your teeth. He’s the evening’s crowd-pleasing acrobat, and Ms. Mead matches him pratfall for pratfall in their jokey opening duet, set to “Let’s Fall in Love.” (Ms. Tharp is not above the occasional pun.)

The fourth pair, Matthew Dibble and Rika Okamoto, are less clearly defined. He’s the man jilted by Ms. Farmer when she takes flight with Mr. Selya, and she’s — well, she’s the other girl. But Mr. Dibble, who trained at the [Royal Ballet](#) School in London, has a beautifully pure classical technique that is a pleasure to watch, and Ms. Okamoto has an appealing, pixie-ish presence. The duet they share in the second act, to “How Deep Is the Ocean,” is the most tender and intimate of the evening.

Ms. Tharp knows as well as any choreographer working today how to structure an effective pas de deux, but her grasp of narrative architecture is less secure. The relationships among the characters could be more crisply defined, and the second act of “Come Fly With Me,” in which nightclub and bedroom merge, could use some sharpening. Editing is not always Ms. Tharp’s strong suit.

But the final sequence, set to “My Way,” chosen both for its status as a beloved Sinatra standard and for its rousing intensity, tends to sweep any lingering questions from your mind. Bathed in Donald Holder’s silvery lighting, the couples soar and sweep across the stage in evening attire. (Balanchine fans might be reminded of the finale of “Vienna Waltzes.”) The images of the ecstasy of romantic union and the lyrics’ paean to individualism do not logically cohere, but rapture and logic do not make happy dancing partners. I’ll take rapture anytime.