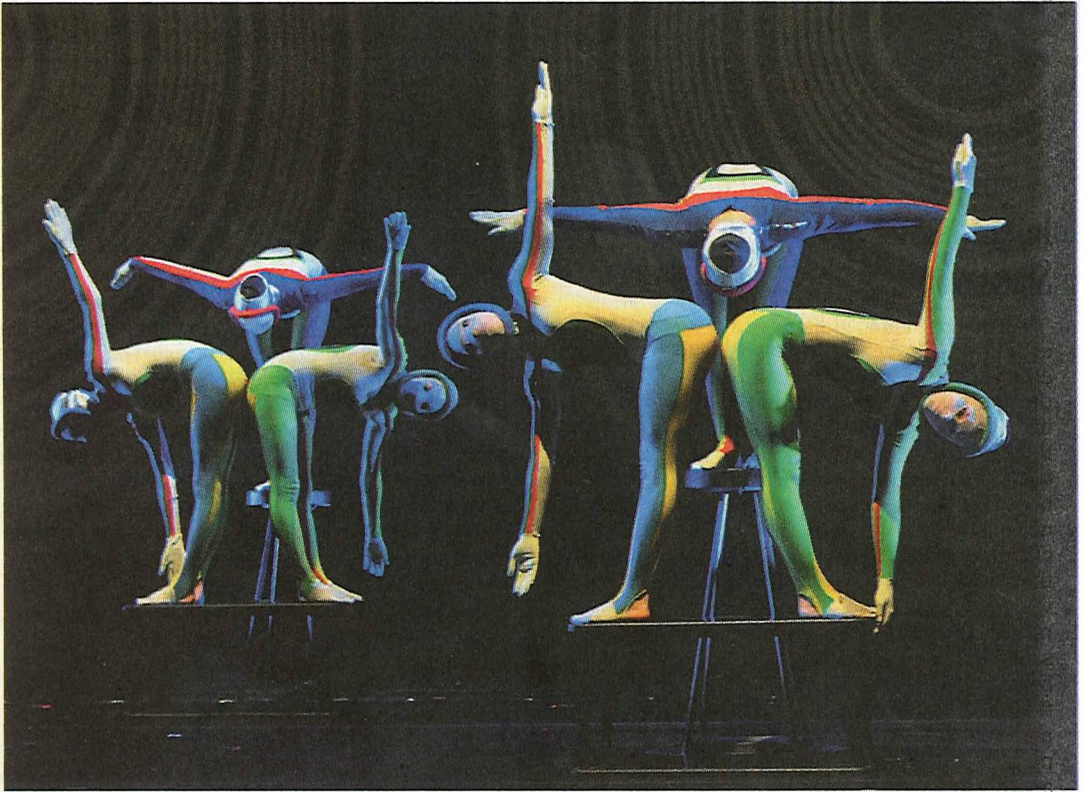


THE Arts

The New York Times

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2011



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sharing the Legacy: Alwin Nikolais, at the Kaye Playhouse, included dancers from Tulane in “Temple.”

Mirrors, Clowns and Other Visions

Alwin Nikolais, a pioneer of multimedia dance, didn’t stop at movement. He was a stagecraft wizard whose love for abstraction — along with lights, projections and electronic music — was strangely life affirming. He drew on a dancer’s musculature, not a dancer’s emotions. “He doesn’t even have to be a person — he can be a thing, a place or a time,” he once said.

Yet movement and dancers formed the core of his psychedelic adventures. At the Kaye Playhouse on Friday night, the Hunter College Dance Department presented a program of nine Nikolais pieces. Part of Hunter’s Sharing the Legacy series, the evening featured dancers from several colleges and marked the final American component of the Nikolais centennial celebration.

Nikolais’s dances have influenced countless artists and companies — obviously, Pilobolus and Momix, but even the French conceptualist Xavier Le Roy and the performance artist and designer Leigh Bowery came to mind on Friday. The program, directed by Alberto del Saz, was a long one, with the sort of uneven performances expected from students. But for the sheer assemblage of Nikolais works — selections from 1955 to 1985 — it was also

invaluable. “Temple” (1974), “Aviary” (1978) and “Gallery” (1978) haven’t been seen in New York in years.

The opening “Crucible” (1985) was splendid: 10 students from Muhlenberg College created shapes behind low mirror panels. After their disembodied hands and arms became creatures in a double reflection — fancifully deceiving the eye — they continued until a leg and then a torso emerged, essentially freeing the body from the machine.

Students revisit Alwin Nikolais’s eclectic work.

“Temple,” performed by students from Tulane University, demonstrated that while Nikolais’s works may seem simple, they require constant motion and core strength to give the spine tactile ease. (The dancers struggled.) Students from Marymount Manhattan College fared better in excerpts from “Mechanical Organ” (1980), a dance geared toward pure movement.

Nikolais’s illusionary works about the natural world created a more lasting effect. In “Aviary” excerpts, dancers from Hunter College stood on low, transparent

footstools; flexing one foot, they turned their heads sharply, flicking their wrists with darting, birdlike acuteness. “Pond” (1982), performed by Middle Tennessee State University students, transformed dancers into waterlilies gliding along on rudimentary skateboards. And in “Water Studies” (1964), shown by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, dancers seemed to shoot up from water like rippling reeds.

Students from DeSales University used elastic bands to weave a majestic cat’s cradle in “Tensile Involvement.” (From 1955, it’s one of those vintage Nikolais works that still make you gasp.) In excerpts from “Imago” (1963), courtesy of Southern Utah University, a group of Harlequins — wearing white miniature top hats and armless sack dresses — became individuals through their whimsical movement.

And in excerpts from “Gallery,” performed by students from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Nikolais’s chilling side was evident: clusters of electric green faces seemed to float in the air. Creepy clowns, with carnival wheels instead of feet, rolled across the stage. Despite the outlandish, colorful costumes, the dancers, performing with precision and rigor, stayed true to the ominous message: Don’t get too comfortable — a nightmare could be lurking around the corner.

GIA
KOURLAS
DANCE
REVIEW