

Tharp divides critics with latest paean to Frank

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By JOCELYN NOVECK, AP National Writer — 1 hr 27 mins ago



AP — Twyla Tharp appears at the curtain call for the opening night performance of the Broadway musical 'Come ...

NEW YORK — It was back in 1982, as [Twyla Tharp](#) tells it, and [Frank Sinatra](#) had just seen "Nine Sinatra Songs," one of her early attempts to fuse her intricate, furiously physical style of dance with Sinatra's cool, silky vocals.

And the Chairman was crying.

"I always wanted to be a dancer," he told Tharp, deeply moved.

"You're great," the choreographer says she replied. "But don't give up your day job."

More than a quarter-century later, Sinatra is long gone, but Tharp clearly remains as enthralled with him as ever. The culmination of that fascination is "Come Fly Away," her latest Broadway show, featuring an 18-piece band and no fewer than 35 dance numbers including "Makin' Whoopee," "My Funny Valentine" and a wild, gravity-defying version of "That's Life."

It's not a total surprise that Tharp, long known for the relentless energy she brings to the stage as well as the groundbreaking ways she has melded traditions of dance and music, has again sharply divided the critics. This time, she's even divided the arts pages of a hometown paper, The New York Times, with drama critic Charles Isherwood calling it "dazzling" and dance critic Alistair Macaulay calling it "horrid."

But like one of her classic body throws, Tharp knows how to careen between hits and misses.

Her 2002 "Movin' Out," to the music of Billy Joel, ran for three years on Broadway, won two Tonys (including one for her choreography) and was nominated for nine. Four years later, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," based on Bob Dylan's songs, was a flop and closed after less than a month. (In both productions, as now, Tharp was director and choreographer.)

Tharp isn't eager to talk about the latter experience as she sits for an interview in a sparsely furnished room at the Marquis Theater. Or maybe "sits" isn't the right word — she soon moves onto the floor and folds herself into a tiny child's "Elmo" booster seat, legs sprawled outward. Do not try this at home. Only a dancer can do this with grace, and Tharp, at 68, is still clearly a dancer.

But even when you're talking to her from above, quite literally, Tharp is a commanding presence. You sense she may be testing your knowledge when she refers only to "Jerry" (meaning [Jerome Robbins](#)) or her past works. She also turns the tables and asks, "Wait, what did YOU think of that?"

Her self-analysis is winningly honest. When talk turns to "Once More Frank," her Sinatra-based 1976 duet with ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov for American Ballet Theatre, her interviewer notes it was received with ambivalence. Tharp interjects: "No. It was wildly unsuccessful."

"It was disliked because the decision was made to take Misha, a classical dancer, and let him just do something else," Tharp says. "The audience was not ready to let him."

Tharp, however, was hardly done with Sinatra. Her "Nine Sinatra Songs" and "Sinatra Suite" two years later were successful and enduring, and a few numbers from the former made it to "Come Fly Away," including the bracing "That's Life" — a rage-filled, body-hurling display that is quintessential Tharp.

Yet it was a long journey to the current show. There was the 1985 "Singin' in the Rain," also on Broadway. Besides the 2002 "Movin' Out," about the impact of the Vietnam War on a group of young people on Long Island, there was her work in film — on "Hair," "Amadeus" and "White Nights," among others. She's written several books, the most recent in 2009, "The Collaborative Habit."

And she's choreographed dozens and dozens of ballets for companies worldwide. To take just one example, "In the Upper Room," to the churning music of Philip Glass, has an almost cult status among dance aficionados and is performed from New York to Seattle to Miami to Moscow to Madrid to, next year, Tokyo.

Somewhere along the way, a couple of familiar dancers gave Tharp the idea for "Come Fly Away." Karine Plantadit and Rika Okamoto, who had appeared in previous Tharp shows, came to her and said, "We want to dance!"

"I said, 'Well, there isn't anything. But we can do some classes,' Tharp says. "So they came in and we worked on technique." She can't remember what made her bring out the Sinatra music again, but she did.

"Then I said, 'OK, why don't you bring partners?' And we started working on partnering. And the snowball grew."

"Come Fly Away" looks at four couples on one boozy night at a New York nightclub, and all that transpires between them: attraction, love, lust, anger. The negative reviews have complained there is too little plot, that we learn too little about the characters to care. Others say, who needs plot when the dancing and music are this good?

Tharp says the story line in most musicals is reductive, and unrealistic. "How many times in your life does something happen without a clear accounting of how, when, why?" she asks. "MOST of the time."

"This show is about how people rub up against each other — when it makes sense, and when it doesn't," she says. "There isn't a beginning, middle and end."

In "Movin' Out," a singer performed Joel's songs onstage. In "Come Fly Away," Sinatra's own voice is used — accompanied by that 18-piece band and occasionally a female vocalist. As with other aspects of the show, this technique has divided critics.

"Frank isn't here anymore," Tharp says. "What do we have? We have his voice. And with Sinatra it's his take — his emotional take on the lyrics — as much as the sound of the vocal that's important."

Few Sinatra fans would argue with that. But that brings up another point: Will "Come Fly Away" appeal to non-Sinatra fans, especially younger people who didn't grow up with his music? And does Tharp's athletic, sometimes exhausting style mesh with the coolness of Frank?

Laura Mead, who plays the ingenue role of Betsy, is 26, way too young to have grown up with Sinatra. But she doesn't think one need be a Sinatra fan to appreciate what's happening onstage.

"He's not the singer I grew up with, but these standards have been reinterpreted by so many others, up to the present day," Mead says. "And his voice resonates. It really doesn't feel like we're dancing to these old chestnuts."

Mead also feels the Tharp and Sinatra styles work together well. "Her dance is extremely physical, yes, but it has a lot of range," says Mead. "It's very balletic, then jazzy, then modern, then acrobatic. And Sinatra, too, has all sorts of elements."

What's most rewarding for Mead is the constant challenge of Tharp's choreography. "At the end of the night, you feel like you've really been worked," she says. (A separate cast performs the matinee performances.) "It's very, very hard. But otherwise, it could get boring."

Mead's partner in the show, the startlingly acrobatic Charlie Neshyba-Hodges, says Tharp demands much of her dancers, "but never more than what you're able to produce. There's a great deal of respect for the dancers."

Familiarity between choreographer and dancers helps. "There's a language you learn to speak with Twyla in the studio," says Neshyba-Hodges, who has been working with Tharp for seven years. "That's what we all share." The cast is largely made of Tharp regulars, such as the Tony-nominated [John Selya](#).

To Neshyba-Hodges, 30, one of the most important things about "Come Fly Away" is that it shows, in a time where [dance companies](#) are cutting back, that dance is a vital enterprise. "A show like this provides a platform for dance to take flight in all ways," he says.

Even if the show doesn't achieve the three-year run of "Movin' Out," it already seems sure to be more successful than the troubled marriage of Tharp and Dylan that led to "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

"We learn from everything," Tharp says now. "Had I not done the Dylan I would not have done this. I learned a lot about narration, about directing. That show served its purpose, as things do."

"Come Fly Away" has certainly received one important seal of approval — from Sinatra's daughter, Nancy, who came to see the show during its tryout run last fall in Atlanta.

This time, it was the daughter who cried.

"She said, 'I wish Dad could be here,'" Tharp relates. "I said, 'He IS here.' She started crying some more. And so did I."

And then Tharp gives an answer to perhaps the most interesting question surrounding this whole enterprise, namely: What keeps bringing her back to the silky sounds of Sinatra?

Her reply clearly comes from a choreographer's mind.

"Sinatra," she says, "sings from the soles of his feet."

(This version CORRECTS that Charles Isherwood reviewed, not Ben Brantley)