International Herald Tribune

TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2010 THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES GLOBAL.NYTIMES.COM

Brave return for Tharp to Broadway, with Sinatra

NEW YORK

After her Dylan show flopped, she harks back to her decades-old roots

BY GIA KOURLAS

Twyla Tharp opened the door of her Upper West Side penthouse on a snowy morning wearing an emerald-colored sweatshirt, its hood pulled firmly over her silver hair. Ms. Tharp's no-nonsense way of looking out at the world becomes less intimidating the better you know her. On this particular morning, with her enormous eyes magnified and peering intently behind round glasses, she had the air of a cute green owl about to rob a bank.

Ms. Tharp is making a brave return to Broadway after her previous show, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," based on the music of Bob Dylan, received a critical drubbing and closed after just 63 performances. Having expressed regret that she did not stick closely enough to her instincts in its creation, Ms. Tharp has the opportunity with "Come Fly Away" to return to music with which she has a profound connection.

The show, which opens March 25 at the Marquis Theater, follows four couples looking for love in a New York City nightclub and features the vocals of Frank Sinatra; Ms. Tharp has choreographed dances to his songs since the 1970s. In anticipation of the new show she was ready to show her roots — artistic ones — in the form of a stack of DVDs.

"I'm really awkward with this mouse," she said, seated in front of her computer. "It's like, I don't drive a car, either."

Though the production as a whole is new, certain dances have long been a part of Ms. Tharp's Sinatra repertory. Her first dance to one of his songs, "Once More Frank," is infamous. In that 1976 duet, Ms. Tharp and Mikhail Baryshnikov — in white costumes and jazz shoes — moved together with a remote sort of harmony at an American Ballet Theater gala.

"It was actually very primitive partnering," Ms. Tharp said as we watched the only recording that exists of the material — rehearsal footage from the program "Making Television Dance," which Ms. Tharp produced in the '70s.

"We didn't have any of the tools of the trade, and we also didn't have any of the clichés of the trade," she continued. "Meaning, O.K., here's a glissade to a jeté lift from behind."

The problem was that it was unusual, and unusual wasn't what ballet audiences in 1976 wanted.

"What is the legend of the piece?"

Ms. Tharp asked the question with a tone that implied one should know the answer. As experience has shown, an interview with Ms. Tharp, 68, generally requires that you answer as many questions as she does. So here goes: The dance was booed. "That's correct, yes," she said. "Because he didn't jump."

Mr. Baryshnikov, in a telephone interview, said he found the experience more amusing than upsetting. "Of course the audience wanted me to dance 'Corsaire,'" he said. "I never liked those big galas anyway, and I felt instinctively that I did something right. It was a very different piece, and it was clear in my mind that she really had something.

"It was probably the first and last time I saw Twyla cry. I put her in a taxi. I knew that she would overcome this kind of setback. But she was hurt. She was." He paused for a moment. "She recovers very fast, as you notice."

SARA KRULWICH/NYT

Twyla Tharp created "Nine Sinatra Songs" in 1982. Now she'll offer "Come Fly Away."

Mr. Baryshnikov admires her grit. "Should be that way. I salute her for that."

There's hardly an area of dance that Ms. Tharp hasn't conquered since she entered the New York scene in 1965, two years after graduating from Barnard College. After performing briefly with Paul Taylor, she struck out on her own, creating early modern experiments

THARP, PAGE 13

A brave return for Tharp to Broadway

THARP, FROM PAGE 12

that led to commissions with companies like the Joffrey Ballet and American Ballet Theater, where she created "Push Comes to Shove," her first ballet for Mr. Baryshnikov, who was struck by her "kind of blunt delivery of intricate steps and no acting out," as he put it. "It was very matter of fact."

As her work on movies like "Hair" and "Amadeus" attests, Ms. Tharp embraces the chance to reach large audiences. "Movin' Out," her greatest Broadway success, ran for more than three years. Unlike that show, which was set to Billy Joel music and featured the band on a platform above the dancers, the Dylan show mixed the singers and dancers onstage and created a circus atmosphere that didn't sit well with Dylan fanatics or critics.

In her recently published book "The Collaborative Habit" (Simon & Schuster), Ms. Tharp wrote that the show was a great drain and that her biggest mistake was deviating from her initial instinct: to create a dancing show based on Mr. Dylan's love songs. "To have used them and dramatized the relationships they suggest might have produced a show I could feel more intensely," she wrote.

It's true that in terms of popular music, Ms. Tharp can create a world that few others achieve. In 1973 she choreographed to the Beach Boys in "Deuce Coupe," which broke down the barrier between ballet and modern dance. Her collaboration with Mr. Joel brought dense, technical and psychological dancing back to Broadway and made stars of the dancers John Selya, Keith Roberts, Elizabeth Parkinson and Ashley Tuttle.

But her dances over the years to Sinatra's music are especially potent, diving beneath the surface of relationships to expose their beauty and flaws. As Sinatra once told Ms. Tharp, "You give me class."

Ms. Tharp's relationship with Sinatra, who died in 1998, was pragmatic; they were friendly but didn't know each other that well, though at one point, she said, he told her that he'd always wanted to be a dancer. "And I said: 'Well, you know, Frank, you danced awfully good in the movies. Actually you are a dancer. Don't quit your day job.' We went out to dinner."

While the duet "Once More Frank" didn't survive long after its premiere, both "Nine Sinatra Songs," from 1982 (choreographed after Ms. Tharp studied the partnering of Irene and Vernon Castle for the film "Ragtime"), and "Sinatra Suite," a vehicle for Elaine Kudo and Mr. Baryshnikov created two years later, remain in the repertories of companies across the world.

In "Come Fly Away," three numbers remain intact from "Nine Sinatra Songs": "One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)," "That's Life" and "My Way." But beyond choreography, the connections between productions are more grounded in characterization than in actual movement. It's as if the couples in "Nine Sinatra Songs" are showing us what they might look like in the morning. To varying degrees, they let their guard down.

"When I did 'Nine Sinatra Songs,' I couldn't have told you who these people were," Ms. Tharp said. "Nor could I have structured a piece that would keep them all bouncing in the air simultaneously, have their stories evolve, put them in a place and give you a time frame that starts here and goes there."

SARA KRULWICH/ THE NEW YORK TIMES

RICHARD AVEDON

LOIS GREENFIELD

Twyla Tharp, above, with "Come Fly Away" performers; left, with Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1984; below, with Mr. Baryshnikov in 1976, when they were booed.

"It's a physical metaphor for an emotional condition. It has nothing to do with design."

In Atlanta, where an early incarnation of the Sinatra show was presented at the Alliance Theater, Charles Isherwood, writing in The New York Times, called the production exhilarating, adding, "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."

Most of the cast members also have a long history with Ms. Tharp, who nourishes dancers like no other choreographer today. Kate and Hank (Karine Plantadit and Mr. Roberts) have a slightly ambiguous, tempestuous relationship. They end up "just friends," which Ms. Tharp sees as a complicated, valid kind of love. "These days," she said dryly, "I think we could all agree that having a 'just friend' is not a bad thing."

Marty and Betsy (Charlie Neshyba-Hodges and Laura Mead) are an extension of the couple from "Somethin' Stupid" in "Nine Sinatra Songs"; awkward and shy, they embody innocence and what Ms. Tharp described as earth. Slim and Chanos (Rika Okamoto and Matthew Stockwell Dibble) are the rebound couple that has a one-night affair, and Babe (Holley Farmer) dances opposite Sid (Mr. Selya). This couple, Babe in particular, originates from "All the Way," another number from "Nine Sinatra Songs."

Ms. Tharp refers to Babe and Sid as the "it" couple. At their first meeting, the song "I've Got a Crush on You" plays as they circle each other, battling not so much for each other as for the spotlight. For their exit Ms. Tharp choreographed a lift in which Mr. Selya balances Ms. Farmer straight across his shoulders — this way, they each remain where they think they belong: in the center of the stage.

"It's a physical metaphor for an emotional condition," Ms. Tharp said. "It has nothing to do with design. It has to do with metaphor. Think I could do that when I did this?" She pointed in derision to the computer screen, which was frozen on a scene from "Nine Sinatra Songs," to indicate how much she's learned about theater since its premiere.

"I don't think so," she continued. "You know how I learned stuff like that? Reading 19th-century novelists. Here are the ones: Tolstoy, Dickens, Balzac."

Ms. Tharp gets excited when she talks about literature. As an adolescent in Rialto, California, where her parents owned a drive-in theater, she was a devoted bookworm. Reading taught her about psychological reality, about how an "it" couple functions.

"You'll read much of that in both Tolstoy and Balzac," she said. "Dickens is on the side. I mean, I just happen to love Dickens. He has a very skewed perception of human nature."

In the show, Sinatra's voice is paired with live musicians (18 instrumentalists, including a conductor, Russ Kassoff, who also plays the piano, and a female vocalist: Hilary Gardner and Rosena M. Hill alternate performances). For Ms. Tharp, Sinatra's voice remains classic beyond the orchestrations and gossip, which date him, she said.

As the story goes, Sinatra cried after watching "Nine Sinatra Songs"; he told Ms. Tharp it was because, she said, "it made him feel so strongly what the music was about."

The singer's daughter Nancy Sinatra, who attended the production in Atlanta last autumn (when it was called "Come Fly With Me"), said that "Come Fly Away" was like being at a Sinatra concert. "I told Twyla that she is the keeper of this flame right now," Ms. Sinatra said. "She's the big kahuna. She is doing it better than any of us can do it because she's got Dad. I have a radio show, and I can play his music until the cows come home, but it's not the same because people are listening to a box. In this show you feel it, you taste it, you see it, you hear it."

Ms. Sinatra, whose husband, Hugh Lambert, was a dancer and choreographer (he died in 1985), was already a fan of Ms. Tharp's before they met at a rehearsal last summer in New York. As Ms. Sinatra recalled, "She said, 'How are you?' and looked at me with those eyes, and I said, 'Well…'" Ms. Sinatra paused to laugh. "I knew I couldn't lie. I said, 'I've got some pain in my knee.' She said, 'Oh, well, that shouldn't keep you from doing situps.' Because she saw my belly. Isn't that great? She's great."

Ms. Tharp is a grandmother now; her grandson, judging by a photograph on a table, seems to resemble her. But she brushed off the suggestion with "that's Jesse's lighting," referring to Jesse Huot, her son. No, Ms. Tharp hasn't gone to mush.

In "Come Fly Away" she doesn't want to appear to be repeating herself; instead she sees what she's doing as revisiting the past and extending it into the future. She compares her endeavor to Martha Graham's Greek cycle. "She always returned to those myths," Ms. Tharp said. "She didn't return to the same Clytemnestra."

But it took Ms. Tharp some time to decide to tackle another Sinatra. In a 2006 interview in The New York Times Magazine, she told Alex Witchel, "I can't park myself in the past yet." She was referring to watching dance companies perform her older works, but for "Come Fly Away" she has done that. Still, she isn't living in it.

Throughout the process of "Come Fly Away" Ms. Tharp has pondered a couple of questions: What makes something the same? Can something ever be the same way twice? The Broadway production concludes with "New York, New York," but it is the song that precedes it — "My Way," which ended "Nine Sinatra Songs" — that is the most meaningful to Ms. Tharp.

"People read 'My Way' wrong," she said. "They read it from the lyrics and think that the man singing the song is saying, 'Things got to be done my way.' Unfortunately, I think we've probably all had the experience that if we're in a relationship where one of the partners is doing it 'my' way, that relationship is not going to survive."

So, as Ms. Tharp asked, as time goes by — slyly referring to the title of her 1973 dance — what does survive? For one thing, "My Way": that song and that dance. "It's an encapsulation of time," she said. "It's encoding time. The dancers are different, although dancers are dancers are dancers. This is the strange thing: Dancers don't age."

Her expression was almost tender; her hood had slipped off.

"It's very touching, and it's very much at the heart of what dance is," she said. "There is nobody else who can revisit the past and only find youth."

ONLINE: **TWYLA THARP, IN DETAIL**

Reviews, multimedia and more on the choreographer. **global.nytimes.com/arts**