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# Come fly with her

theater

Yes, we've got high hopes for

**TWYLA THARP'S NEW SHOW** that blends dance with the songs of Sinatra



**CRITICAL MASS**  
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**T**wyla Tharp is back on Broadway, a fact more inevitable than it may appear.

The boundary-defying director-choreographer — who had a massive Broadway hit with her Billy Joel musical, “Movin’ Out,” in 2002 and a deafening flop with her Bob Dylan follow-up, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” in 2006 — opens “Come Fly Away” Thursday at the Marquis Theatre. The music this time is Frank Sinatra, the style is ballroom and the plot, minimal. Any similarities between her career and his did-it-my-way independence are way too obvious to ignore.

In fact, Tharp has been inventing and reinventing herself and audiences since the early '60s, when she was already merging her pop aesthetic with fiendishly precise

movement for her all-girl company of avant-garde gladiators. Her first piece, “Tank Dive,” was four minutes of severe anti-ballet minimalism to Petula Clark singing “Downtown.” Tharp created a quintet on a full basketball court and videotaped her body changes during pregnancy in a dance to Willie “The Lion” Smith music.

In 1973, Tharp shook up the dance world by introducing her rigorous street-wise modern style, Beach Boys music and the Joffrey Ballet to each other with “Deuce Coupe,” an international phenomenon that made Beach Boy drummer Dennis Wilson cry and declare it “the greatest moment of my life.”

But Tharp never really fit in fixed cultural categories. In a nonprofit dance world that then, as now, depended

on contributions to survive, she was adamant about what she called “the morality of running without a deficit . . . I conceptually don’t like fundraising,” she told me in an interview in 1977. “I’d much rather think we’re a viable entity that, like it or not, is marketable.”

Equally radical was Tharp’s idea that dance — brainy and sexual and wildly unpredictable — should belong to a big, broad, commercial audience. There never was a dancer-choreographer who appealed to both wide and specialized audiences without selling out her nervy neoclassical rigor. And stardom? “I don’t think it will tarnish me to become a star,” she told me then in that charming, troublemaking, deadpan voice that runs interference for the onslaught of her ideas.

In 1984, she elaborated: “I never could see why dance isn’t as popular as rock and roll — and paid as well.” By then, she had broken ballet barriers at American Ballet Theatre and the New York



PHOTO BY ARI MINTZ

Holley Farmer and John Selya don't look like strangers in the night in this number from “Come Fly Away,” opening Thursday.

## Come fly with her

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City Ballet. She had choreographed movies, including “Hair.” She was dressing her dancers in Oscar de la Renta and collaborating regularly with her great friend Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Soon after he defected from Russia, she had put the ultimate classicist in a derby and all-American dance vocabulary in a piece called “Push Comes to Shove.” “Seeing her ballets opened a whole new world of possibilities for classical ballet steps,” he said then, irresistibly adding that her choreography made him “feel like a fish in the sand. I always had the feeling I was out in a boat that had no sail, doing forbidden things.”

One of the economically forbidden things she did was self-produce two brief seasons on Broadway for her company. The more famous one was in 1981, when she rented out the Winter Garden Theatre for “The Catherine Wheel,” her full-length collaboration with David Byrne of the Talking Heads. “It used to be sort of sinful to want an audience,” she said then. “We thought it might dissipate the purity of the effort or something.”

So here she is again on Broadway, a place where, to quote Sinatra, she has been “up and down and over and out.” In 1985, she made her Broadway directing debut with a bizarre choice, a tracing-paper adaptation of “Singin’ in the Rain.” Not surprisingly, her touch was lost in a straitjacket of somebody else’s style.

“Movin’ Out” wiped out those memories with a virtually wordless dance musical that trusted Broadway audiences to understand a story told in movement. Tharp was in her element, setting loose her cerebral, slinky, impossibly difficult, deliriously pleasurable self on the broad com-

mercial audience she has always deserved. Then came her derailment with a circus musical inspired by Dylan songs and doomed by preachy allegorical ambitions. People who didn’t know her history and her resilience started dismissing her as a one-hit wonder.

I did not see “Come Fly Away” during its well-received premiere in Atlanta last fall, but the new show — four couples in a nightclub — appears to be urging Broadway audiences into more new territory. How much dance-driven drama will people embrace without the clear story line of “Movin’ Out”? Right now, in the heat of the TV dance-contest craze, will people be more able to understand the human relationships that develop through the steps themselves — what Tharp has described, in another context, as “the terror of a piece that has no reassuring tradition”?

Tharp has had stupendous-success with three Sinatra compilations over the years. When she first created “Once More Frank” in 1976 for Baryshnikov and herself, she says she was looking for music that had a “sexual frisson along with a sexual equality.” In 1982 came a group piece, “Nine Sinatra Songs,” followed two years later with a set of duets called “Sinatra Suite.”

I keep thinking of something Tharp said in our 1984 interview. “I think my career has moved with relative smoothness because I began with a subliminal, very long-term plan — a sense that I was given a way to reconcile a lot of dance that seemed at the time to be unreconciled.” In other words, she is on Broadway — her way.

**WHEN | WHERE** “Come Fly Away” opens Thursday at the Marquis Theatre, 1535 Broadway. For tickets, call 877-250-2929 or go to [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com).

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