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THEATER

Come Fly With Her.

Dance has gone mainstream. And that's just the way Twyla Tharp likes it

High and low Tharp's Broadway shows feature tunes by artists from Billy Joel to Frank Sinatra

BY RICHARD ZOGLIN

WHEN TWYLA THARP WAS 8 YEARS OLD, her family moved from rural Indiana to a small town near San Bernardino, Calif., and opened a drive-in movie theater. Tharp's mother, an accomplished pianist, had put her precocious daughter through the usual cultural paces—lessons in ballet and tap as well as several musical instruments—but the family movie palace is where Tharp got her first real feel for an audience. She'd work at the snack bar and sit in a junked car way up front to watch the movies—westerns, musicals, horror-film fright fests on Friday the 13th. Whenever a plot started to drag, Tharp would have to hurry back to the concession stand. "I learned about pacing," she says. "Suddenly the movie gets a little boring—you knew there was gonna be a rush on the popcorn."

That prairie populism never left her, even as Tharp, a couple of decades later, became a darling of the avant-garde dance world. She shocked traditionalists with *Deuce Coupe*, her 1973 dance piece that wedded classical-ballet moves to Beach Boys songs. She worked with Mikhail Baryshnikov and David Byrne (and had romantic flings with both), shuttled between the American Ballet Theatre and Hollywood and then, in 2002, rocked Broadway with *Movin' Out*, her dance musical set to Billy Joel's greatest hits. Ballet choreographers like Jerome Robbins had done musicals before, but Tharp broke new ground, building a hit show almost entirely out of dance—and redefining what a Broadway musical could be.

Now she's about to open a new Broadway show, *Come Fly Away*, set to the songs of Frank Sinatra. Ol' Blue Eyes has been an obsession of hers for years—this is the fourth dance piece she's created for his music—and she's ready for the critics to complain that she's repeating herself. Yet this high-low priestess explains her new approach—the show is set in a nightclub and follows the relationships of four couples—by citing writers like Tolstoy and Balzac (she's been devouring both lately) as well as the Ernest Borgnine movie *Marty* (which provides the model for one of the couples). Ordinary theatergoers are likely to catch little of this. But they'll see a show that uses dance to make the best case possible for Sinatra's artistry—and delivers the purest jolt of pleasure to be found on a Broadway stage.

Dance, if you haven't noticed, is hot. It's not the high-art sensation it was in the '70s, when Robbins and George Balanchine were working, companies such as the Joffrey Ballet and Alvin Ailey were drawing hip new audiences, and stars like Baryshnikov were celeb-magazine fodder. Instead, it has glided into the mass-audience mainstream. Broadway shows like *Billy Elliot* and *Fela!* (the Afrobeat musical choreographed by Bill T. Jones) put dance front and center. The ballet-like triple axels of Olympic figure skaters drew huge ratings at the Winter Games. And TV hits like *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance* have given ballroom dancing a cachet it hasn't had since Fred Astaire hung up his tux.

Tharp confesses she's never seen either show—she hasn't got a TV set, she says, and doesn't "know squat about ballroom dancing"—but cheers the trend. "It's great. I'm all in favor of it." And why not? Tharp has spent most of her career striving to expand dance's vocabulary and audience. "People often say to me, 'I don't know anything about dance.' I say, 'Stop. You got up

In *Movin' Out*, Tharp broke new ground, redefining what a musical could be

Keith Roberts and Karine Plantadit, below, in her new show, *Come Fly Away*

this morning, and you're walking. You are an expert. I'm very, very interested in how people who come to my shows with a kind of innocence respond."

Tharp, 68, is talking in her penthouse apartment overlooking New York City's Central Park. It's an airy, loftlike space with blond wood floors where, if you're lucky, she'll show off a step or two to illustrate a point. Pixieish and intense, she talks fast, stares hard, answers questions with more questions. It's not hard to understand her reputation as a prickly taskmaster.

"Are you tough to work with?"

"Does it sound like I'd be?"

"Well, yes."

"I try hard to be responsible," she explains. "To have done my homework. So when I come [to a rehearsal] I have a fairly clear path to suggest we go on. But I do believe that I respect the people I work with."

After moving to New York and graduating from Barnard College, she studied with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham before beginning to create dances for her own troupe. Many were spare, experimental works (including *The One Hundreds*, which begins with two dancers performing 100 different moves of precisely 11 seconds each and ends with 100 people doing all of them at the same time). But she also choreographed pieces to the music of Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton. When she was working on *Deuce Coupe* for the Joffrey Ballet, some company members refused to perform it. "They were classical artists and had their own definitions about what art needed to be," she says.

Tharp hasn't shied away from stretching her own conception of what art is. She has worked on Hollywood films (*Hair* and *Ragtime*, among others) and directed the 1985 Broadway revival of *Singin' in the Rain*, which got a critical drubbing that humiliated her. ("A catastrophe," she called it later.) Even after the success of *Movin' Out*, she had another misfire with *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, in which she used a circus motif to illustrate the music of Bob Dylan—a conceit that no one much liked.

But that experience helped drive her back to Sinatra. Originally she had wanted to do Dylan's love songs, she says, but was dissuaded for commercial reasons. Now she's returned to the basics: romance and movement—and winning over the audience. "It's called 'Make the folks feel a little better for an evening, and leave on a high,'" Tharp says. And if you miss the Balzac references, she'll probably forgive you. ■

