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Let's Be Frank

Twyla Tharp scores big with Sinatra-based 'Come Fly Away'

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Charlie Neshyba-Hodges in 'Come Fly Away' / Photo by Joan Marcus

are, what they hope for, and where they have been.

These dancers have, in most cases, lengthy histories with Tharp, and the combination of her insight into their strengths and quirks, and their trust and willingness to take an extra leap of faith for her, makes for many stunning highlights. The four couples, finding a haven in a place away from the realities of life's daily routines, represent a range of romantic possibilities. Winning over the audience at every turn are Laura Mead, the pert, open-hearted ingénue, and Charlie Neshyba-Hodges, the nightclub's eager, boyish waiter who ditches his apron to win her over, despite his innate goofiness and (expertly feigned) clumsiness. Their inherent sweetness and deft timing make them a perfect match, and in the course of often amusing duets to breezy numbers like "Let's Fall in Love" and "You Make Me Feel so Young," they make their innocent yet sensual connection. By the time they reach "My Funny Valentine" near evening's end, they have achieved something deeper, and you feel hopeful for their future.

Providing an extreme contrast are Karine Plantadit, a dynamo and vixen who burns up the stage with her sexy, leggy presence, and Keith Roberts, who conveys knowing experience through his suave, plush dancing. They are a been-there-done-that pair, who clearly have a lot of history but cannot resist extending it in the course of the evening. These two cannot be in the same nightclub and stay away from each other. The boldness with which they throw themselves into Tharp's most daring, fierce partnering is marvelous and almost scary at times. Their material includes two duets adapted from Tharp's 1982 classic, "Nine Sinatra Songs," which can be seen as the template from which this show evolved. They make "That's Life" into a seething power struggle, even as they let you sense their delight in the power struggle. They've done this dance before, and will have no choice but to do it again. Even when they dance a duet to "Just Friends" that implies wistful regret, their shared intensity—matching the ardent melancholy of Sinatra's vocals—implies their connection is too deep for that. Soon after, in "One for My Baby" (another of the 1982 duets), their wee-hours intertwined antics seethe with sensual possibilities.

John Selya, who has long been a brilliant Tharp interpreter, and whose macho bravado she taps into with wit and originality, is paired with elegant, magnetic Holley Farmer, and they make a sophisticated, complex couple. She makes her entrance with a deferential Matthew Stockwell Dibble in attendance, but it doesn't take long before she and Selya find their match in each other. Selya was sensationally memorable as the working-class Eddie in Tharp's *Movin' Out*, but here his muscular dancing has a new elegance and his persona is more grounded, if still volatile. He tones that down in the elegantly reflective solo Tharp has given him to "September of My Years." It requires him to do less, to suggest more, and it's fascinating to watch him harness his feisty technical power to internalize and suggest, rather than exclaim. Farmer, whose serene presence and understated sensuality give her a special glow onstage, portrays a woman who's clearly used to getting attention; the men on stage gravitate to her as soon as she appears, and she toys with them haughtily in "Witchcraft."

Dibble more than holds his own amid Tharp's A-list men, with his creamy phrasing that makes the most virtuosic passages resonate with elegance and nuance. He takes up with Rika Okamoto, a winsome, slightly enigmatic presence who is a good-time girl, ready for fun. They have fewer duets than the others, but make their presence felt through the understated knowingness of their dancing.

It's invigorating to experience Tharp's range of approaches to the duet form, and to witness such an array of unbelievably skillful and seemingly spontaneous dancing. What keeps *Come Fly Away* from leaving as indelible and searing an impression as *Movin' Out* is its extremely presentational aspect, and its occasional tendency to become overly busy. Even as the characters—each of whom has a first name in the program—move through their evolving relationships, we never lose awareness of how intensely they are also striving to connect with the audience. They make their entrances with a flourish, and delight in what they have to show us, as well they should. Tharp takes each of her ready-for-anything dancers to the next level, challenging them to show us everything they are and all they can do, and they come across as vibrantly human and endlessly intriguing.

Come Fly Away

Open run, Marquis Theater, 1535 Broadway (betw. W. 45th & W. 46th Sts.), 877-250-2929; \$66.50-\$126.50.

Come Fly Away may have just a wisp of a story, but the sheer kinetic thrill provided by an abundance of superb, uninhibited dancing is far more dramatic than most of the bland or campy product that fills many a Broadway stage these days. Nearly three dozen vintage Frank Sinatra songs (his recorded voice skillfully blending with a crackerjack onstage big band) provide the many moods as four vivid couples navigate their romantic attractions, quandaries and outbursts in the course of two hours in a classy nightclub. Director-choreographer Twyla Tharp clearly knows and loves her eight leading dancers, and each of them lets us know through their amazingly vivid dancing who these people

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