



## THE NEW YORKER

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DANCING

# HIGH HOPES

*Twyla Tharp's "Come Fly Away."*

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A man leans over a woman's rib cage as if he were going to take a bite out of her clavicle. The woman, in high heels, stands in arabesque on the man's thigh long enough to sink a hole in it. These maneuvers are from Twyla Tharp's new show, "Come Fly Away," at the Marquis Theatre, a dance to Frank Sinatra. Reportedly, he liked what she did with his songs. She says that he told her, "You give me class." If he had lived to see "Come Fly Away," he might have changed his mind.

Tharp has been making dances for about forty-five years, and we are accustomed, now, to seeing her repeat herself. As she put it last month in an interview with Gia Kourlas, of the *Times*, she has a right to go on developing the things that are on her mind. Sinatra, for example. She has now made four pieces, large and small, to his songs. The second of these, the 1982 "Nine Sinatra Songs," is widely considered to be the best dance she ever made. It is a suite of (mostly) ballroom-inspired duets, performed under a mirror ball. One number, a tango, was studied and stylish; another was a very funny drunk dance, another an apache, teeth-gnashing and spectacular. Each was highly concentrated: these two people, these steps, this music—it was as if nothing else existed. "Nine Sinatra Songs" has now been set on twenty-eight companies.

To top "Nine Sinatra Songs" would be a difficult business, but Tharp told Kourlas that she had done so, expanding the earlier piece into "a physical metaphor for an emotional condition." That's what a lot of us thought she did in "Nine Sinatra Songs," and it's exactly what she doesn't do in "Come Fly." The show is set in a night club. (For most of the thirty-five songs, Tharp uses Sinatra's recorded voice with a live seventeen-piece orchestra—a sort of reverse karaoke.) Seven couples enter: four featured pairs, plus three backups. Ostensibly, the couples are couples, but in fact several of the partners are looking for an upgrade. Holley Farmer, one of the lead

women, enters on the arm of Matthew Dibble and barely looks at him again.

The dancers are given names in the program, but one wonders why, since none of them have what you would call a story. Never, apart from maybe the Sufi whirling dervishes, have I seen a show of such sameness. Farmer, because she is always the seductress, always has to deliver that act. Karine Plantadit, because she is invariably the spitfire, always has to spit fire. (Couldn't the one black dancer in this cast *not* have been the hot-blooded gal in the gold lamé bra?) And each has her own, unremitting facial expression. Farmer gives us one smile—come on-a my house—throughout the show. Plantadit wears so broad and constant a grin that it looks as though someone had lodged a coat hanger in her mouth.

The clichés roll in. Tharp has always had a weakness for vaudeville-type humor. Laura Mead and Charlie Neshyba-Hodges are the innocent, goofy pair. He is a busboy in the club; she is a young thing in a pink dress who wanders in, perhaps looking for a place to do her homework. Not once, but many times, the love-struck Neshyba-Hodges, approaching her, falls over, whereupon she bashfully turns away. He also pit-pats his hand over his heart.

With the shtick and the repetitions comes a fatal lowering of energy. The whole effectiveness of "Nine Sinatra Songs" rested on its concentration, its economy. Here we get the opposite: a series of fidgets, small things that go nowhere. Plantadit throws chairs, but at whom? She speaks some French, but we can't hear it. When Dibble is dumped by Farmer, Rika Okamoto, a woman who hasn't had a lot to do, helps him out: she has sex with him on a table. The mood spreads to the others, and an orgy starts, but the participants don't seem to get much done. Or, if they do, you can't see it. I tried.

Tharp is famous for boosting skill and commitment in dancers, and this showed

even in "Come Fly." Aptly, the best number was a solo for her best dancer, John Selya, to "September of My Years." There was no reason for an autumnal sort of dance at this point in the show, but we got one anyway, and it was actually a thrill—both the choreography (blunt) and the performance (effortful, unembellished). By the end, Selya stood before us in a sweat-

Tharp doesn't just like older dancers; she likes dancers she's used to. (Her career has been mostly freelance; she hires a new company for each show.) Selya and Roberts have both worked for her for twenty-odd years. They were the first-cast leading men of "Movin' Out" (2002), set to Billy Joel. Okamoto was the Vietnamese girl, and Plantadit a standout corps mem-

to know what they were about. Maybe Tharp got bored rehearsing this old material again.

Tharp is unashamedly ambitious commercially, and, as her great middle period was coming to an end, she decided that Broadway was where she belonged. Her two early shots, "When We Were Very Young" (1980) and "The Catherine



Rika Okamoto, Matthew Dibble, Holley Farmer, John Selya, and Keith Roberts in rehearsal. Photograph by Gus Powell.

drenched shirt, its buttons straining. This number, as Tharp would say, was a physical metaphor for an emotional condition.

I believe that she gets such performances partly by a simple strategy: she often employs older dancers. Selya and Farmer are in their forties. (Before she joined this show, Farmer was the senior dancer of the Merce Cunningham company.) Keith Roberts, Plantadit's partner, is also in his forties, and though his technique is somewhat eroded, he has a lot of style, and a beautiful line. How touching it was to see him, in a black business suit, tuck a little pas de chat into a big leap. When Tharp just throws something or other onto the stage, these seasoned, confident dancers can fill it out, or at least distract us with their excellence.

ber, in that show. Dibble starred in it on tour. Neshyba-Hodges, with his amazing acrobatic skills, played one of the lead clowns in Tharp's 2006 musical to Bob Dylan songs, "The Times They Are a-Changin'." From these people, she has coaxed tremendous performances, and if, Selya apart, they didn't beam the same number of kilowatts in "Come Fly," that is not their fault. They did their best, I'm sure. Still, there were some terrible moments, notably in the three numbers from "Nine Sinatra Songs" that Tharp inserted into the new show: "One for My Baby" (the drunk dance), "That's Life" (the apache), and the finale, "My Way." How subtle and moving they were in "Sinatra Songs." How shallow and false they look in "Come Fly." The company didn't seem

Wheel" (1981), had limited runs. "Movin' Out," her first big Broadway venture, ran for two and a half years. But she also produced two major turkeys, the 1985 "Singin' in the Rain" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'." She should give up on Broadway, not because she sometimes bombs (many good directors do) but because Broadway dance is inimical to her talents, and even to her values, which, in her best work, have to do with wit, spontaneity, and populism. The slung pelvis that you see on Broadway, the frozen grins, the women showing their panties, the men trying to look interested: she is willing to produce these things, but, because she knows better, they come out looking cheesier, phonier, than in the work of Broadway regulars. ♦