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Q&A

60 Seconds With **Twyla Tharp**

Creativity starts with a blank space: an unwritten novel, an uninvented product, a blinking cursor on a computer screen. For Twyla Tharp, it's an empty dance studio. "The blank space can be humbling," Tharp writes in her new book (with Mark Reiter), *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life, a Practical Guide* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). "But I've faced it my whole professional life. **It's my job. It's also my calling.**"

Over a 40-year career, Tharp has **created more than 125 dances**, many of them landmark departures from the art's mainstream. Last year, she birthed *Movin' Out*, a narrative dance set based on the music of Billy Joel that has won two Tony Awards and months of sold-out theaters.

Tharp, 62, is famously tireless and demanding—not least of herself. For her, **creativity is a discipline**, a function of relentless preparation and hard work. **FAST COMPANY** spoke to Tharp about creativity, fear, and what's inside the box.



FAST COMPANY: *The empty studio. Is that terrifying to you or thrilling?*

THARP: It's both. It's a matter of discipline, of not distilling exhilaration from terror. Because terror, loathsome as it is, is very energizing. To channel that, to call it excitement, enthusiasm, curiosity, maybe that's not a bad thing.

FC: *"Theme and variation" is a standard musical form. You also see it as a creative form.*

THARP: Theme and variation is one of my favorite formats because it allows for constant change, yet there's always something to which the change is grounded. To make real change, you have to be well anchored—not only in the belief that it can be done, but also in some pretty real ways about who you are and what you can do.

FC: *So, having some theme at the core is what allows you to take risks that feed innovation.*

THARP: Right. Something tangible upon which to build something less tangible.

FC: *Most of your work has started with your own ideas. But you also do pieces on commission. Do you like doing other people's ideas?*

THARP: There's something in me that resents it. Like, I'm not going to work for you. I work for God. Me and God. On the other hand, you think, "This is a special challenge. And also, this pays for eight months of me and God."

FC: *For each project, you have a box that you pack with things you think will inspire ideas. How do you pick what's going in there?*

THARP: It's completely instinctual. It's a little shiver; there's something that tickles

me about this. It's just the vaguest kind of energy that attaches itself to an idea, or a song—something that makes sense. For the past seven years, there has been in the back of my mind a project that I've been boxing. I already have three boxes. The bad news is that maybe seven-eighths of the stuff is there just because I like it—and only one-eighth has any relevancy to the project.

FC: *So what's in the box?*

THARP: Oh, I can't tell you, because then you might guess what the next thing is.

FC: *I wouldn't even try.*

THARP: Yes, you would. You would try to guess the future. Everybody always wants to go there.

—Keith H. Hammonds