

SUNDAY, JULY 20, 2003

## Fast Chat **Twyla Tharp**

**A**wards don't change your life," says Twyla Tharp, *tan and fit in gray sweat gear, referring to her recent Tony for choreographing the hit show "Movin' Out," set to the songs of Billy Joel. She should know. The brilliant 62-year-old choreographer's accomplishments range from making some of the best dances for modern and ballet companies of the last 50 years to writing an autobiography to choreographing the films "Hair," "Amadeus" and "Ragtime," plus two Broadway shows and directing a couple of Emmy-winning television specials.*

*Never one to rest on her laurels, after a two-year immersion in "Movin' Out," Tharp is moving on. She will bring the Twyla Tharp Dance Company, fresh from its successful London debut, to the Joyce Theater July 28 to Aug. 9. And she is avidly promoting her new book, "The Creative Habit," due from Simon and Schuster in October, in which she reveals how to live a fully creative life, no matter your calling. Freelance writer Valerie Gladstone caught up with Tharp at her publicist's midtown Manhattan office, during one of her rare breaks from being fully creative.*

**What was most satisfying about doing "Movin' Out"?**

Pulling it out of the fire. It got bad reviews when it opened in Chicago, and I had to find a way to fix it. There's no prototype for the show. The action is told entirely through the dance. I had to learn to balance all the elements. It was like being in a recording studio with a big mixing board.

**Will you do another show?**

I always take what I've done and use it as a launching pad and unfold it into my next project in some way. I'm working on something but I won't say what. It's like a pressure cooker; if you start letting out a little bit of air, the pressure is off.

**What's it like to return to your modern dance company?**

It's a privilege. It's one of the things dance is about — constant rejuvenation.



Newsday Photo / Ari Mintz

**You have superb dancers. How do you pick them?**

My standard response is I have to fall in love with them. It's also a given that they're gorgeous and in radically good shape. They also have to have a sense of humor and be intelligent. And I'm not a big one for arrogance. Finally, I select them for their spirit. You want people who are willing to commit, willing to home in on the work and take it away from the ego. This is an ensemble of superstars.

**The program includes a revival of your groundbreaking "The Fugue" from 1970, with three dancers performing 20 variations on a [21-beat] theme; the recent "Westerly Round," set to music by Mark O'Connor; a lively mix of ballet and American folk dance and the emotional "Surfer on the River Styx," plus a couple of your other landmark**

**ballets. Quite a mix, but you didn't choreograph anything new?**

I'm just now coming out of the show and finishing my book. They took all of me. Now I can start on other things. The program offers a good range of my work.

**Why did you choose a career in dance?**

It was the '60s and it was the only one I could break into. How many women were in film, theater and art then? Not many. But in the '60s, choreography was a woman's realm, the ladies — Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille and Doris Humphrey — had laid the groundwork. Otherwise, I might have chosen any of those other professions.

**Why did you do the book?**

To pay for the show. Everyone thinks you make a bundle of money on a Broadway show — would that that was true! During the development period — which in this case lasted two years — you're paid absolutely nothing. The book advance paid for those two years of development.

**Why did you pick this subject?**

When I give lectures, I'm often asked where I get my ideas. So I decided to write a book and answer the question of how to be creative and more productive.

**What's the key?**

Preparation. We think of creativity and habit as being mutually exclusive, whereas actually they are complementary. You have to discipline yourself to do what you want to do on a daily basis.

**How did you become so disciplined?**

My mother accomplished it for me. She gave me lessons in ballet, tap, jazz, modern dance, piano, violin, viola, painting, shorthand, the drums, baton twirling and French. She expected me to be good at them all. That took discipline. I didn't have a choice.

**Is there a downside?**

Sure. You don't have a life. But I deal with that in the book, too — how to tell the difference between being in a rut and being in a groove. ■