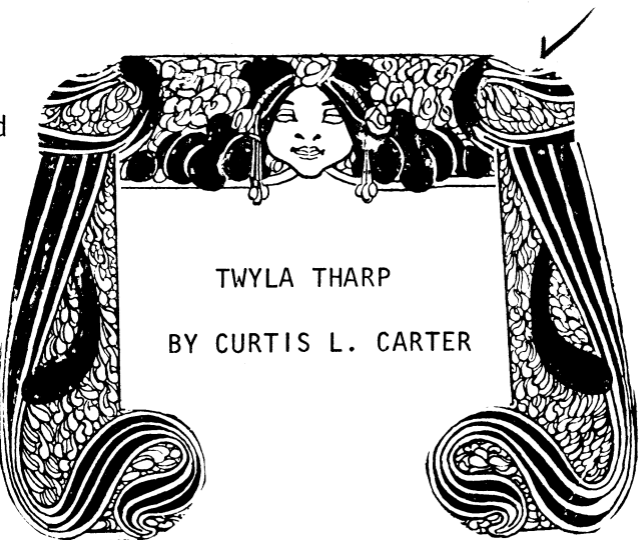


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Twyla Tharp [Discussion of the career of Twyla Tharp]

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TWYLA THARP

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The name that stands above all others this season in the field of dance is TWYLA THARP. Even Nureyev and Baryshnikov do not overshadow Twyla's triumphs -- a sold out season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, inclusion in the National Educational Television dance series, and the role of choreographer of the season's most celebrated work, "Push Comes to Shove," performed by the American Ballet Theatre. All of this climaxes three years of growing recognition, including her successful collaboration with the Joffrey Ballet in the works, "Deuce Coupe (1973)," "As Time Goes By (1973)," and "Deuce Coupe II (1975)."

By any standards Twyla Tharp's rise to fame is a breath taking achievement. But of course she did not just arrive on the scene. Study with such masters of modern dance as Nikolais, Graham, and Cunningham, a degree from Barnard College in art history, and a period of dancing with the Paul Taylor Dance Company supplied a solid foundation for her innovative choreography. Ten years of intensive work on her own, beginning in 1965 with "Tank Dive," a

four minute piece that was performed at the Hunter College art department, precede the current achievements. Since 1965, Twyla has produced a string of notably "avant garde" experiments in movement, with performances in Europe, New York, Minneapolis and across the country. These performances have occurred in a wide variety of dance environments including gymnasiums, art galleries, video studios, stair wells, the lawn at Connecticut College as well as regular stages.

I have thus far been unable to see the celebrated "Push Comes to Shove." But the video airing of "Sue's Leg" on March 24, prompted a fast trip to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to view Twyla and her company perform in what is billed as the "First New York Season." The Brooklyn Academy is becoming an important center for dance and related arts activities. It even offers in the lobby such delicacies as Serbian bread stuffed with delicately spiced Mediterranean salad and Quiche Lorraine. Inside the opera house, the atmosphere is subdued gilt, providing a comfortable, if stylistically disjointed setting for the Tharp Dance Company.

The program included "Sue's Leg (1975)," the piece that had been presented in the NET video series, a premiere work, "Give and Take," "The Rag Suite" from "The Rag Dance (1972)," and "Bach Duet (1974)." Tharp, Rose Marie Wright, Kenneth Rinker, Tom Rawe, Jennifer Way and Shelly Washington were the dancers.

"Give and Take" is Tharp's bow to the American Bicentennial. The piece consists of six episodes, beginning with Gregor Werner's "Prelude and Fugue in C Minor" and

including Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever," Meacham's "American Patrol," Franko's "The Chimes of Liberty," Sousa's "Liberty Bell," and Ronell's "Willow Weep For Me." The dancers in this work look more like H'Doubler dancers than like Balanchine dancers -- aiming more at the gymnasium, movement for everyone than at the remote, elegant look of the Balanchine's Lincoln Center performers. Tharp's gym suit costume accents her boyish looks and evokes a very anti-romantic feeling. The music is enjoyable and the dancing is exciting. It consists of such movement elements as punctuated walks, spins taken at high speeds, mock balletic caricature, bits of the Charleston, and other elements abstracted from popular dances of the 20th century. The speed with which Twyla moves is particularly remarkable. "Give and Take" evokes nostalgia while it provides a collage of Americana experiences. Most importantly, Twyla's lively choreographic mind gives the piece irresistible energy.

What did the audience think? These comments represent a sampling of what was being said in the halls during the first intermission:

"It's fairly enjoyable."

"I don't know what to watch."

"I wonder whether you have to be American to get it?"

"I like it, but I can't relate to anything."

"I wonder what Merce Cunningham would think? . . . He's a great admirer."

"It's wonderful . . . lots of fun."

"There's no resolving it . . . just all falls away."

"She doesn't deserve being loved: blup, blup, blup."

Twyla herself becomes a part of the audience as she sits in costume with a coat over her legs upstairs, close to the left side of the stage. She surveys the excited audience and then watches intently the performance of her company dancing "Rag Suite" and "Bach Duet." "Rag Suite" danced by Tom Rawe and Jennifer Way, returns again to music of the 1920's. Mannered partnering -- in remembrance of the past -- but with a fresh emphasis -- characterizes this more restrained piece. Rinker and Wright dance in the "Bach Duet." They wiggle, spin, twitch, spit with unending bursts of the unexpected. Behind the scrim, conductor Lloyd Walser leads Alexandra Hunt (soprano), Kathleen Hegierski (mezzo soprano), Eugene Moye (cello) and Jesse Miller (double bass) in a collaborative performance of the second movement of the J.S. Bach's Cantata BWV 78.

"Sue's Leg" is set to popular music including "Please Take Me Out of Jail (1927)," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love (1939)," "Tea for Two (1939)," "Ain't Misbehavin' (1940)," "I've Got My Fingers Crossed (1935)," and other familiar songs that people used to dance to and perhaps still do. Such music makes the audience want to get up and dance. The video version of this work juxtaposes film clips of people from past eras actually dancing to these songs with the periodic appearances of Tharp and Company as a counter force. Tharp's style in this piece is jerky. Sometimes the dance follows the illusions suggested in the music, but mostly the dance movements interrupt these illusions causing the viewer to focus on what the dancers are doing. The contrast leads the viewer to see the movement in the film clips in a fresh way.

Twyla herself appears boyish in satiny pants that resemble a fancy warm-up suit. She struts, slides, goes limp, spins, bounces, continually thwarting expectations with movements that are contrapuntal to the musical illusions. Twyla establishes mildly absurdist relationships between the dance components: costumes that have the look of the gym, highly abstract illusionist-romantic music, and butchy-baroque movement that runs counter to both. There is a contrast in the movements themselves too. Twyla alternates technically difficult feats with collapsing bodies and with the jerky uncoordinated shakes of bouncing zombies. The BAM performance lacks the film clips of dancers from the twenties, thirties and forties that help to show where Twyla is coming from. These enable her to carry the juxtaposition found in the music danced "as it was" and as Twyla has choreographed it. After seeing the video, I strongly missed the added richness of the clips that were missing in the live performance.

Strangely, the same enthusiastic audience (of the first intermission), who could speak of nothing but the dance, hardly mentioned it at all during the second intermission. Why? With all of its vitality and genius, Twyla's movement vocabulary seems rather limited in options. The first ten minutes is the most exciting. After that the movement takes on a quality of sameness. The movement patterns of each piece are different but the total effect is one of sameness that does not sustain the initial excitement. What is a choreographer to do when the unexpected becomes too familiar? Why, do something else, of course. I can't wait to see what it will be.