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1-1-1978

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Curtis Carter
Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

Published version. *Dance Dimensions*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1978): 6-9. Publisher Link. © Wisconsin Dance Council 1978.

THE MILWAUKEE BALLET:

AT CENTURY HALL AND THE PABST THEATER

By Curtis L. Carter

In its expanded Milwaukee season, the Milwaukee Ballet has opened "on all fronts" this past fall, including the Performing Arts Center, Century Hall, and the historic Pabst Theater. Century Hall and the Pabst Theater offer two contrasting settings for dance. The two settings and the respective performances in each are the subject of discussion here.

Century Hall offers a colorful, informal cabaret setting located on Milwaukee's east side at 2340 North Farwell Avenue. It houses a non-profit corporation to present artistic ventures and a "for profit" bar and restaurant to help support the performance center. Century Hall came into existence in April of 1976, under leadership of Max Samson and manager Allan Kaiser, to provide experimental space for the performing arts. Artists who are not ready for commercial presentation, can try out their works at Century Hall, according to Samson. It offers dance, theater, and musical performances on a continuing basis. Judging from its popularity with young and not so young audiences, Century Hall is an idea that has caught on.

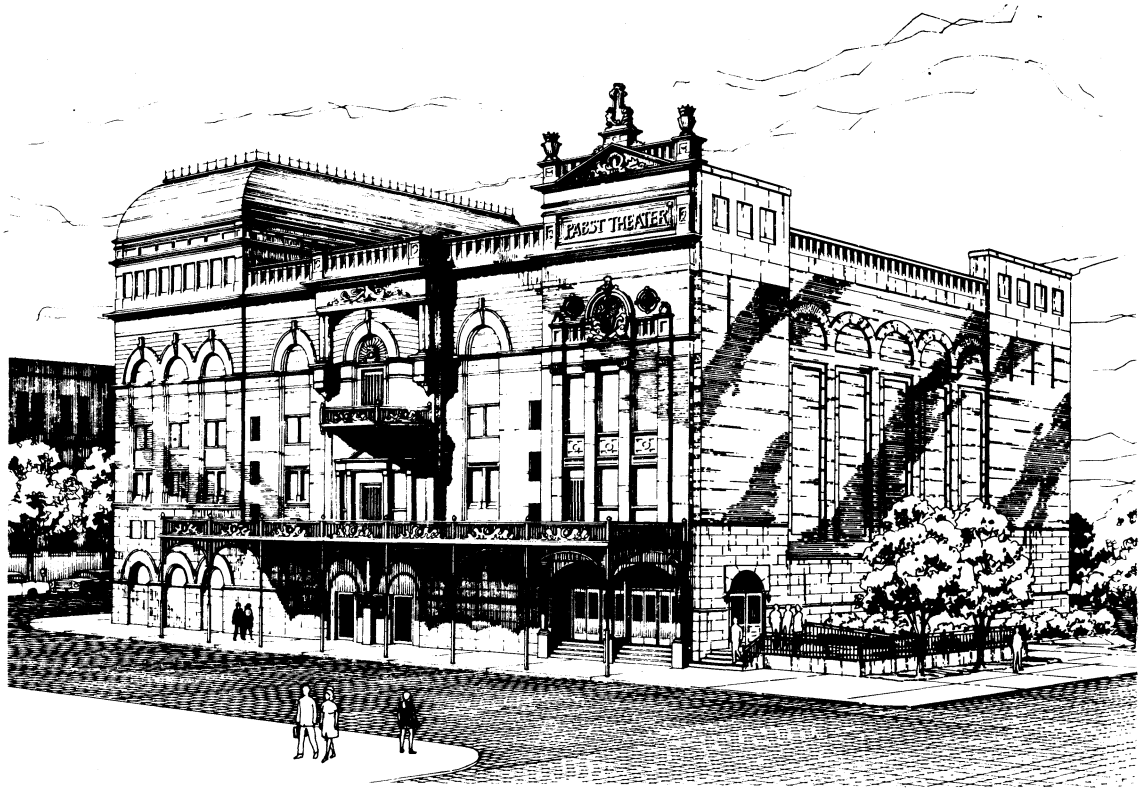
Century Hall's low key, casual atmosphere attracts persons who might not take the first step to becoming involved in a dance audience in a more formal setting. The hall makes it easy and fun to explore the performing arts.

Most amazing to me was the scope and enthusiasm of dance audiences at Century Hall. I arrived ten minutes early for the November 9 performance to find standing room only. The enthusiasm of the crowd was apparent before the dancers appeared, and, when they did appear in the arena performing space, the crowd cheered and whistled with exuberance usually reserved for basketball games. Dance performances, which are held every Wednesday night, always provide full houses, according to Max Samson. The house seats 250 for the ballet, and provides seating capacity for other younger dance companies.

The rectangular dance space with seating on four sides occupies a former bowling alley. The floor is made of wood from the bowling alleys, as is furniture for the restaurant. Lighting is minimal, and the dancers perform within a few feet of the audience. The relatively low ceiling advises against using dances with extreme elevations. Milwaukee Ballet performed at Century Hall 11 times last season, and will do 6 performances this season. Other dance groups such as Pandemonium Dance Circus and Susie Bauer Dance Company also use the space.

On November 9, 1977, the Milwaukee Ballet's program included Marjorie Mussman's "Concerto For A City" (first and third movements), and her "Handel's Suite," Jean Paul Comelin's "Sonata A Tre," and Robert Rodham's "Trio Pas de Deux." The only work that might qualify as a crowd pleaser is the dramatic "Trio Pas de Deux" which was the least effective of those works presented.

"Concerto For A City" is about impersonal, crowded, lonely people attempting to cope with city life. I enjoyed the ensemble work for this piece, particularly its intense rhythmic energy, in the crowding and pushing scenes. Intense stares invite the audience to particpate in the work as more than spectators. This convention has been overworked, but it seemed effective in the setting. Mark Diamond dances the role of a lonely street person seeking help. His low-key



The newly restored Pabst Theater

presentation did not give sufficient pathos or vitality to the character.

Comelin's "Sonata" and Mussman's "Handel Suite" gave the audience a strong sense of the physicality of dance. At times the dancers were so close that the spectators could see the dancers' muscles at work and experience their bodily tensions in ways that are not possible in the removed setting of a distant stage. Energy emanating from the dancers' bodies is contagious in this instance, and the audience members can feel it in their own bodies. The loss of the over-all pattern is compensated for by the intensity of involvement.

The renovated Pabst Theater located at 144 East Wells Street in Milwaukee is a turn-of-the-century architectural jewel box, which offers a substantial contrast with rustic Century Hall. Renovation of the Pabst was funded by the City of Milwaukee under the artistic direction of Alan McCracken, the managing director of the Pabst. The Pabst has been renovated with exquisite taste, and is intended as the city's show case for the arts. Minute details of color, lighting, and decorative appointments, and the fine architectural structure itself, have been so well attended to that there is not the slightest hint of ostentation. The Pabst is an art experience in itself, but its understated nineteenth century elegance does not compete with its primary function as a performing arts theater. It is clear that the architect and the restorers understood the importance of creating a total aesthetic environment for artistic performances.

The Pabst offers a choice of approx-

imately 1380 seats in three locations: orchestra and mezzanine circle with comfortable plush seats, and a gallery of low budget, austere chair seats. The inexpensive gallery seats are a part of the Pabst tradition of encouraging students and other low budget audiences to enjoy the arts.

The proscenium stage and orchestra pit establish distance between the performers and the audience at the Pabst. Dancing is physically removed from the audience by the design of the stage. To be too close is actually a liability for dance viewers, for they lose the pictorial perspective that the theater design is intended to provide. Dance audiences should take care to avoid seats close to the stage on either side: it is impossible to see the whole dance from these seats. Missing in the Pabst experience of dance will be the close physical experience that Century Hall offers. On the other hand, the viewer gains the perspective of distance on the larger visual patterns of the dance. From a purist point of view, the Pabst setting no doubt better satisfies the traditional expectations of a performance space for ballet. But each of the two settings has its positive values.

Century Hall, the East Side Performers' Workshop

The November 16-17 engagement marked the Milwaukee Ballet's debut at the Pabst. Jean Paul Comelin's "Partita", Marjorie Mussman's "Cocktail Party", Nancy Smith's "The Company", and Rodman's "Trio Pas de Deux" were performed. The courtly "Partita" includes an interesting sequence where bodies interact to form serial links in a human chain. This work went well enough, but the choreography is not exciting. "The Cocktail Party" contains some moving drama as it depicts human manipulation and rejection among guests at a cocktail party. It is not a satisfying work, however, because the movement is too insubstantial for the theme. The stereotyped story dominates where the movement should be prominent.

Rodman's "Trio Pas de Deux" was very striking the first time that I saw it last year. But it has not worn well in three subsequent viewings: at the Wisconsin State Dance Conference in Green Bay, at Century Hall, and at the Pabst. Possibly this piece is best seen only once. Or perhaps the dancers are no longer doing it with their initial freshness and sensitivity. Mark Diamond moved lifelessly while partnering Leslie McBeth, who also lacked the spark that made the first viewing exciting. I think the piece deserves to be retired for an extended rest, from its present series of lifeless and mechanical performances.

Nancy Smith's "The Company," which is set to Aaron Copeland's "Music for the Theater" creates a circus atmosphere on the stage. Dancers begin on the floor, chins in hands, looking out at the audience. A series of frenetic movements, harlequin faces, bumps and grinds, all at frenetic pace, did not leave a very distinct impression. My

principal question was, why is this work being performed by the Milwaukee Ballet? Admittedly, fine choreography is scarce, and is in demand by companies across the world. But the dancers deserve better: there are a handful of Wisconsin choreographers -- Anna Nassif in Madison, Myron Nadel and Carla Graham-White in Milwaukee -- to mention a few. These choreographers would benefit from the opportunity to choreograph for the excellent dancers of the Milwaukee Ballet. And, in my opinion, any one of them could provide substantially better choreography. Beyond this, there must be more substantial works that are available elsewhere.

Summing up, there are many kinds of spaces where interesting dance can take place. Each space, Century Hall, the Pabst, or another, has its distinctive atmosphere and advantages. Audience members differ in their needs and interests, and there is need in Milwaukee for a variety of dance spaces.