

Twyla multifaceted, refined and easy-going

If there's a star choreographer in American dance that person is Twyla Tharp. Works for the top companies, theatres, musicals, films, TV... with no boundary lines, the expression of an unmistakable style and personality. Her invented dance, while seeming "democratic" and casual, is rigorous, if not intransigent. Like her character. We speak about her on the occasion of the company's latest tour

There is a certain notion in the United States that Europe continues to fantasise about. Utopia, a democracy where opposites live and conserve together: a new frontier, a new world to be invented. The ability to combine professionalism of excellence (spurred by a highly-competitive system) with an easy-going spirit where spontaneity is never a short-cut to sloppiness. Genius over and above technique. With a dab of humour, to avoid taking oneself too seriously.

This idea of America has been embodied for over half a century in dance by the choreography of Twyla Tharp. Driven to excel by the *tour de force* of studies to which she was subjected by her music teacher "mother tiger" – far-ranging subjects (from classical ballet, which Twyla studied with Beatrice Collenette who had danced with Pavlova's troupe, to baton twirling, tap dancing, and the violin) which climaxed in her diploma in History of Art from the prestigious Barnard College of New York – the former girl from Portland (Indiana) is now a 75-year-old silvery-haired lady who

has yet to take a holiday from herself.

"I work all the time," she tells me, "I get up at six o'clock

in the morning and hardly ever go out at night. Creative longevity is a question of staying rational, emotional and instinctive. One needs to read a lot and to continue loving and being open to life."

Creative longevity seems to be in the DNA of the great old-timers of American choreography – Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham having been supreme examples, with 85-year-old Paul Taylor continuing the tradition today. Twyla remained under their wings for a short while: she studied with Graham and Cunningham, and danced for Taylor.

"I was very young," she recounts "but as far back as 1965 I'd already set up my own group; my studies came to an end when I began creating my own choreography. That said, it was an important experience to work with such engaging and cultured teachers. When I branched off on my own, I tried to develop those seeds independently."

Tharp's starting point was the revolutionary post-modern aphorism: "all movement is dance". And she began to take the mechanics of movement apart with a sense of geometrics that denote the sensibility of an art historian (see the moving silhouettes into which the figures of her dancers break up in the opening scenes of her stage work to music by David Byrne, *The Catherine Wheel*).

"At college I had the fortune of studying painting, sculpture and architecture and of exploring the differences between various periods, for example between the Baroque and the Renaissance", she recalls. "I've always read a great deal, not just the classics of great authors such as Balzac and Dickens but, dwelling on the creative process, also what they wrote in-between one book and another."

As was customary for avant-garde artists in New York at the turn of the '70s, Tharp and her company began performing at alternative venues, high-schools and art galleries, overturning the idea that 'modern' or 'post-modern' were of lesser importance than 'classical': similarly to a shopping mall, 'contemporary' became an all-inclusive language in which one could mix a bit of everything: jazz, primitive danc-



Twyla Tharp Dance Company: "Yowzie", c. Twyla Tharp (ph. R. Afanador)

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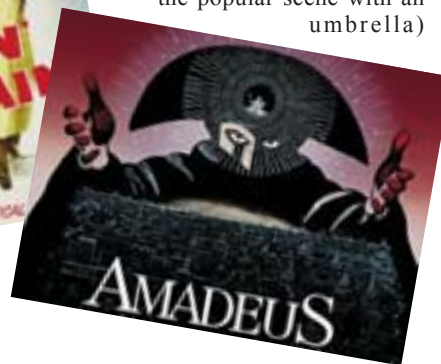
ing, classical ballet. Thus, the eclectic Twyla laid the foundations for the “crossover” style which knocked down barriers, not only within the dance domain, but also between symphonic and pop music, mixing high- and lowbrow cultures. Nowadays this seems quite normal but at the time such choices were startling and inspired a more ‘democratic’ and informal approach even to the notion of ballet per se.

“I grew up in a drive-in managed by my family in California and this instilled in me the idea that art has to speak to everyone. My mother encouraged me to be flexible when it came to choosing music, without differentiating between Irving Berlin and Chopin, Beethoven, American jazz and Scott Joplin. American music is just as valid as

European.”

This led to the creation of shows such as *Deuce Coupe* for Joffrey Ballet, to songs by The Beach Boys, musicals such as *Movin’Out*, written with Billy Joel, and *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, dedicated to Bob Dylan. Her “easy” attitude towards culture has blended with another unmistakable Tharp feature: a sense of humour. Mikhail Baryshnikov (who was anxious to have Tharp at his side during his ten year tenure as artistic director of American Ballet Theatre) was the perfect instrument for embodying this delicate alchemy. In her celebrated 1976 work *Push Comes to Shove*, the blond Misha, at the time the stunning prince of ballet, revealed an unexpected comical streak: his body split in two, waist up and waist down, swivelling arms that incorporated everyday gestures (such as combing one’s hair or, the popular scene with an umbrella)

*Twyla Tharp
Dance
Company:
“Yowzie”,
c. Twyla Tharp*





*Philip Glass,
Twyla Tharp,
David Bowie
(ph. C. Rosegg,
1996)*

within the refined classical ballet lexicon, with legs tilting at an angle, spins, rapid changes of slant. A dance that smacks of Broadway, with a soupcon of *A Chorus line* in the bowler hat and shimmering costume, or in the *en dedans* and Bob Fosse-like pelvic thrusts. In 1982 *Nine Sinatra Songs* saw the light with

Baryshnikov yet again as its protagonist, wearing a tuxedo this time, though he was chewing gum. The result was the quintessence of elegance: a miraculous balance, very hard to replicate today even by a ballet star like Marcelo Gomes. For the general public, however, Tharp will always be the choreographer of cult movies like *Hair*, *Amadeus* and *Ragtime* by Miloš Forman or *White Nights* by Taylor Hackford, starring Baryshnikov and Gregory Hines.

The choreographer's past is recounted in her autobiography entitled *Push Comes to Shove* (later on she published two manuals, *The Creative Habit* and *The Collaborative Habit*) – but what does the future hold? More theatre, Broadway, Hollywood? “I’m always thinking of everything, as if of the various sides of the moon,” she says. “I’ve never said never in the past, though I can’t forecast what’s going to happen in the future. One thing’s for sure: I’m working on a new book. Watch this space, all in good time.”

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American
Dance
Theater:
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Valeria Crippa

