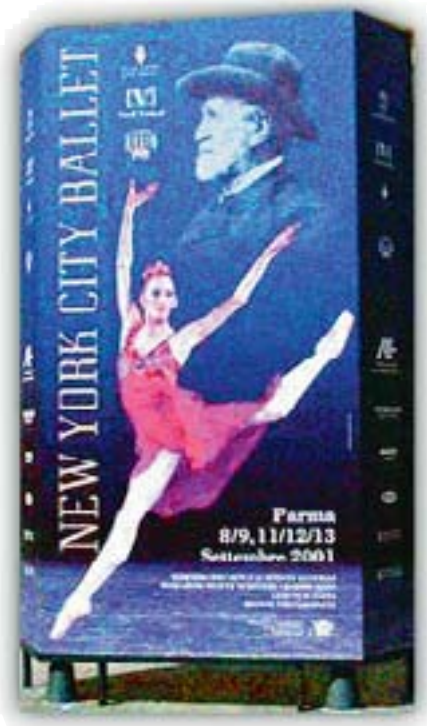
DANCE

A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING TRADITION

By Octavio Roca



A poster advertises the appearance of New York City Ballet as part of Festival Verdi 2001 in Parma, Italy.

There is no time like the present to look at the future of American dance. So much keeps coming, so much is left behind, and the uncertainty and immense promise of all that lies ahead tell us that the young century is witnessing a watershed in American dance history. Candid shots of American artists on the move reveal a wide-open landscape of dance, from classical to modern to postmodern and beyond.

Each of our dance traditions carries a distinctive flavor, and each demands attention: the living legacies of George Balanchine and Antony Tudor, the ever-surprising genius of Merce Cunningham, the all-American exuberance of Paul Taylor, the social commitment of Bill T. Jones and Joe Goode, together with a vibrant new generation of American dance-makers who are responding to the amazing growth of dance companies and their audiences from coast to coast.

Most of all, the optimism and sheer daring that have long marked American dance are alive and well from New York to San Francisco, from Miami to Seattle, and from Houston to our capital in Washington, D.C. They are alive in Mark Morris's cheery iconoclasm, in Lar Lubovitch's invention, in Michael Smuin's jazzy abandon, in Broadway's newfound love of dance, in every daring bit of performance art that tries to redefine what dance is and what it is not. American dancers today represent the finest, most exciting, and most diverse aspects of our country's cultural riches.

The phenomenal aspect of dance is that it takes two to give meaning to the phenomenon. The meaning of a dance arises not in a vacuum but in public, in real life, in the magical moment when an audience witnesses a performance. What makes American dance unique is not just its distinctive, multicultural mix of influences, but also the distinctively American mix of its audiences. That mix is even more of a melting pot as the new millennium unfolds. And it makes for a uniquely varied, gripping tale of dance and dancers facing a new era.

Ours is a constantly changing tradition whose very vitality is what we will bequeath future generations: the cowboys and sailors alongside the magical swans and sugar plums, the dances of political questioning and the dances of pure joy of movement, the selflessness and optimism, the generosity of spirit, the elemental theatrical excitement that is the promise of each rising curtain. American dance stays

alive by ensuring that it never remains the same, that it is a living tradition, the American tradition. Enriching that tradition involves not just looking ahead to the next surprise but also looking back with both pride and affection at the giants of American dance who have made the future possible.

The Balanchine Legacy

"Ballet is like a rose," George Balanchine once said. "It is beautiful and you admire it, but you don't ask what it means." In the colorful garden of 20th century dance, Balanchine, who was born and studied dance in Russia, cultivated the American rose: exuberant, bright, optimistic, and triumphant. He revolutionized ballet for all time, changed the meaning of classicism, nurtured the speed and athleticism he found in the New World, and made these qualities integral to the very nature of beauty in motion.

More than a century ago, Petipa took the French style of ballet to Russia and transformed it into what we know as classical ballet. In the United States in the 20th century, it took an atmosphere of openness to change to nurture the genius of George Balanchine, and it took a lifetime of dance to change the classical ballet once again, to create an American ballet. Yet Balanchine shunned bravura, and he worked consciously against the stellar virtuosity that marked the Petipa style. He deliberately distorted the classical style even as he revitalized its tradition.

Like Petipa, Balanchine loved shifting geometric patterns and cultivated their intricacies with stubborn insistence. He absorbed the rhythmic freedom of American jazz and made the dancer's body reflect it. To this day, Balanchine dancers boast feet flexed almost as often as they are pointed, hips loose and jutting, extensions impossibly high, turned-in poses, and unexpected resolutions in motion that could suddenly make sense of an entire musical score. The living style Balanchine created is drenched in both musical and kinetic logic: the sense of connection from phrase to phrase, the miraculous absence of preparation and the virtual explosion of movement when it emerges, the utter integrity of music and dance. The man created works for every venue, from the Ringling Brothers Circus, from Broadway shows and the American Ballet Theatre, to his very own New York City Ballet.

The tradition of American neoclassicism that Balanchine started is an exuberant work in progress, much of it being carried out today by muses turned ballet masters. Peter Martins, Balanchine's handpicked successor at New York City Ballet, is perhaps the chief guardian of neoclassicism and continues to delight with new ballets that reveal hidden possibilities within the syntax and speed of the American style. Helgi Tomasson, the most sublime male Balanchine dancer of his generation, is the artistic director of San Francisco Ballet and oversees one of the most exciting neoclassical repertories anywhere.

In both New York City Ballet and San Francisco Ballet, young Christopher Wheeldon is at the forefront of a new generation of choreographers who create valid new works that are extending the definition of American ballet. Arthur Mitchell has been performing his own miracles in Manhattan as founder and director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Edward Villella is reproducing and elaborating on the sensual Balanchine style in his Miami City Ballet. The fiery Suzanne Farrell has created her own Suzanne Farrell Ballet at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. Not one of these troupes looks like the others, and not even New York City Ballet looks the way older fans remember it. The dance goes on.

That is Balanchine's legacy, and it is part of our past. But something so irretrievable as the past cannot hold back something as promising as the future. Balanchine's biggest gift of all may well turn out to be the revelation of the endless possibilities of American ballet.

Dance As Theater

Those possibilities, of course, go beyond neoclassicism. It was another immigrant, Antony Tudor, who most radically changed the face of American dance by injecting a dose of emotional truth to the 19th century symphonic ballet formula, adding depth and theatrical impact to the European narrative dance tradition. The American Ballet Theater, the late Tudor's home and today's American

national company, continues in the 21st century a tradition of dramatic ballets that are thrilling reminders of the immediacy, of the vitality, of this art form. Lar Lubovitch's *Othello*, choreographed for both the American Ballet Theater and San Francisco Ballet, is the most ambitious and successful among recent narrative ballets, but there have been many from coast to coast that prove there is more to American ballet than neoclassical steps: the revitalized repertory of Gerald Arpino's Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, Stanton Welch's Houston Ballet, and Mikko Nissinen's Boston Ballet; the continuing balletic explorations of the African-American experience by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater under Judith Jamison; works as diverse as Yuri Possokhov's *Magrittomania*, Dennis Nahat's *Blue Suede Shoes*, Michael Smuin's picaresque *The Christmas Ballet*.

If American ballet presents a varied and colorful panorama, American modern dance boasts a veritable kaleidoscope of possibilities in the new century. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company amazes at least as much today as it did when Cunningham first teamed up with John Cage in 1953 to declare the independence of both music and dance from any restrictions other than those of the human mind.

Paul Taylor is no longer the new kid on the block, but this greatest living American choreographer and his Paul Taylor Dance Company continue to challenge and entertain with the originality of new works as well as the depths time brings to continuing revivals of what are by now classics of modern dance: *Eventide, Company B, Esplanade, Black Tuesday*, and many more.

The Mark Morris Dance Group, which like Taylor's troupe has regular seasons around the United States and frequent tours abroad, marries affection for the classical tradition with the impish freedom to smile and make its own rules: Irreverence and disarming sweetness combine with exquisite musicality in Morris's choreography, which revisits classicism with gusto while investing steps with a riotously contemporary spirit. Morris is a classicist with a true populist's heart.

A Return to Meaning

But perhaps it is on America's West Coast, with the particular flavor of the arts of the Pacific Rim, that American modern dance is witnessing its most original developments. Working in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Patrick Makuakane has been revolutionizing the world of Hawaiian dance and redefining the meaning of the folk art known as hula with his unique company, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu. His work proclaims the universality of Hawaiian culture even as he mixes hula and contemporary rhythms in a giddy multicultural frenzy.

Also in San Francisco, the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company creates a uniquely American blend of traditional Chinese stage pictures, international pop, and the cutting edge of post-modern dance. Cai's all-female, quite beautiful company also boasts a determined desire to entertain, even as the choreographer subtly nurtures a new dance language that stands a radically new Chinese-American fusion.

The African-American experience, gloriously expressed in dance by pioneers from Alvin Ailey to the more recent Bill T. Jones and David Rousseve, has its most youthful and original proponent today in Robert Moses. His West Coast company, Robert Moses' Kin, mixes jazz, blues and rap, poetry and street talk, casual movement and rigorous postmodern syntax in new works — including *Never Solo* and the masterful *Word of Mouth* — that add up to a slice of African-American life, a universal dance message, and, perhaps above all, a gripping theatrical experience.

Margaret Jenkins, a student of Merce Cunningham, makes dances that reflect the coincidence and disjunction, violent clashes and sudden rests that make up much of modern life: Her Margaret Jenkins Dance Company is a seismic force in the American dance avant-garde.

Difficult to classify but impossible to ignore, fellow Californian Joe Goode makes dances that explore and often explode the primal, mythic values of the American heartland. He is the real thing, never boring, always surprising and utterly original, and his highly theatrical work is deeply personal, the truth of it universal. With his Joe Goode Performance Group, the San Francisco choreographer blurs the boundaries of theater and dance while enriching both fields with irresistible insouciance. In his profoundly

moving millennial epic *The Maverick Strain*, irony yields to emotion, movement to ecstasy, nostalgia to hope.

Some of the most original modern dance anywhere is being created by The Foundry, a dance collective founded by Alex Ketley and Christian Burns whose electrifying performances and theatrical use of avant-garde video techniques contain much that is new, and even more that is daring. Perhaps the best news about Burns and Ketley's work is the conviction embodied in their project: Cunningham's revered abstraction for its own sake has been left behind as a glorious aesthetic of the 20th century and, in the dawn of the 21st, dance is returning to meaning, to important themes, to drama and musicality, and to renewed technical virtuosity. The Foundry is at the vanguard of American dance.

Redefining Dance

Dance in the United States today is unique. From classical and neoclassical ballet to the frontiers of modern dance, it is safe to say that there is nothing quite like New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theater, or the Paul Taylor Dance Company, like the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company or the Joe Goode Performance Group, like Robert Moses' Kin or The Foundry. These are only some of the best examples, but more could be cited: the brilliant dance satire of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo and the intimate dance jewels of the Lawrence Pech Dance Company, the earthy sensuality of New York's Ballet Hispanico, the rock-and-roll energy of Ballet San Jose, and the jazzy elegance of Smuin Ballet. Young Americans are challenging and redefining our definition of dance.

Dance in the United States is a kaleidoscopic art form that reflects a wildly varied, multifaceted culture. Dance after new dance appears like so many reflections in a living mirror, their lights adding up to a constellation of optimism. American dance reflects American life. ■

Octavio Roca is the chief dance critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, *and he has been theater, music, and dance critic for the* Washington Post, *the* Washington Times, *and the CBC-Radio Canada network. The author of* Scotto: More Than a Diva, *Roca has also translated several works for the stage, including* The Coronation of Poppea, Orpheus and Eurydice, The Soldier's Tale, *and* Our Friend Fritz. *He collaborated with the composer Lucia Hwong in the cantata* The Uncertain Rhythm of Your Pulse, *which was premiered by the San Francisco Women's Philharmonic in 1993.*

Profile: Choreographer Robert Moses

Over the past decade, Robert Moses — whose dance technique was once described as "an explosion in the eye" — has developed a national and global reputation for his artistry and creativity. Much of that work is rooted in his own multiracial company, Robert Moses' Kin, based in San Francisco. But it emerges as well through his frequent energetic presence on university campuses in residencies and master classes.

Robert Moses and Catherine Ybarra dancing in *Word of Mouth*, which was choreographed by Moses.

Moses began his career in dance as a featured performer with some of the most respected U.S. troupes — including American Ballet Theater and Twyla Tharp Dance. He founded Kin in 1995 with an eye toward giving expression to the African-American experience. But he soon realized that that experience actually was a collection of diverse and divergent experiences. As he later put it: "We must define ourselves in relationship to what is distinctly ours, with the understanding that nobody has accomplished anything alone."

At Stanford University, where he is a lecturer, and elsewhere, Moses focuses as much on dance heritage and the African-American experience as he does on the technique of the art form. In his work, he strives for a multicultural focus. An example of this is *Union Fraternal*, a piece he created three years ago, blending his modern dance perspective with a John Santos score that melds Congolese drumming and

Cuban danzon music mirroring the couple's dance popularized in Havana's social clubs.

One of his greatest choreographic successes is *Word of Mouth*, a celebration of African-American oral traditions incorporating a wide range of supporting material — from a poem by Nikki Giovanni to the music of Duke Ellington, the Staples Singers, and contemporary rap. It is, Moses has observed, about "all the things we carry with us…things we need to know…about our senses of ourselves…about the lineage of language and how that holds people together."

Recently, Moses has moved in the direction of nonfiction in fashioning new work. Early in 2003, he unveiled *A Biography of Baldwin*, the first in a trilogy of works set not to music but to a spoken dialogue — the archival tape of a 1961 seminar whose participants included novelist James Baldwin, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and poet Langston Hughes, among other prominent African Americans in the arts.

Ultimately, Moses sees choreography as more expansive than linear. "Dance is about imagery," he has said. "We must stop treating dance as if it were music or literature, because while it sometimes tells a linear story, it reaches people in a different kind of way." To the extent that dance is a system, he maintains, "it has to be serving the image, or the motion, and not the other way around." ■

A Conversation With Judith Jamison

No one who ever saw Judith Jamison in performance can forget the tall, lithe figure, with arms seemingly extending into outer space, who brought significant recognition to dance as performed by African Americans. As a dancer for the globally acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 1965 to 1980, Jamison performed landmark pieces — such as the anguished Cry *and the exultant* Revelations *— that invariably brought audiences to their feet. Her years on stage with the Ailey company laid the foundation for her second career; since 1989, she has been a choreographer and artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City.*

Judith Jamison dancing in *Cry*, 1976.

Q: What has been happening over the past decade or so in dance that excites you?

A: Quite simply, the most significant development is that there are more opportunities for dancers to dance. Even though we have companies closing and funding is difficult, every time I turn a corner, there's some young choreographer who wants to take the plunge. That has never been more consistent than it is now. I have three friends — one who's a veteran, Donald Byrd, in Seattle — who are starting new dance companies now. As the dance world retracts, it expands. It just keeps breathing. The caliber has gotten much higher, and there are more opportunities.

There may never be pioneers like Alvin Ailey, and there may not be times like that again. But because the ground has been made so fertile, young people are feeling that wonderful creative urge to make a statement — that "I have something to say, too."

In my generation, 30 years ago, dancers were filling their time between performances as waiters or postal workers. Now, dancers dance between performances. At the Ailey school, for example, we have choreographic workshops for dancers. They realize today that a dancer's life is short. Earlier generations never thought that way. In the past 10 or 20 years, a sense of urgency has arisen. "I've got to get it done now. I've got to get my statement out to the world as soon as possible." My generation was never about longevity. Dancers are so smart now, planning their lives and stretching themselves in ways that we didn't years ago.

Q: Is choreography taking new forms?

A: I think so. But I always wait for the next brilliant person coming up. There are many new stars on the

horizon, young choreographers who have the brilliance but need the exposure. Take Troy Powell of Ailey II, our junior company. He was 10 years old when Alvin discovered him as part of our outreach program to schools. Later he joined Ailey II, and then I brought him into the main company, where he stayed for 10 years. He had an agenda. He wanted to choreograph. Since he was full of all the knowledge he had gained as an "Ailey baby," he did. Now he is Ailey II's resident choreographer.

Q: We know that, historically, Alvin Ailey picked up techniques and ideas during his many travels overseas — more than a generation ago — to exotic locales. Are there influences from abroad affecting the scene today?

A: I think the situation has reversed itself. I remember going to discos in Europe while we were on tour, and we'd bring dozens of records with us, to bring the music to Europe. Now it's the reverse. There's been a real evolution, a return of our own stuff back to us. Influences keep streaming back and forth across the oceans. We're very influenced by each other.

Q: Is dance today still dominated by the creative giants of the past — George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey — or are there new forces taking hold?

A: I see new forces constantly, new dancers, new interpretations. I was in *Revelations* in the 1970s. I saw it with Mr. Ailey in 1963 — same work, different interpretation. Each generation validates itself. Each generation's dancers bring something fresh. They rejuvenate the piece, which is brilliant in the first place. The dance lives because they're doing it.

At two o'clock this afternoon, I had one cast doing *Revelations*, and tonight I have another one dancing it. As long as they believe in and are committed to their craft, they transcend the age of the piece. But the piece must be brilliant. As long as a person is influenced by the world and knows the craft, there will always be something new. If you want to get down with some West African movement and add some club dancing to it, then all of a sudden it becomes something new. There are always people stepping out on that edge — and they're getting younger and younger.

Q: In this somewhat uncertain economic period, how does dance cope?

A: You have to nip and tuck all the way. It's all relative — whether you just began or whether you're 45 years old. But I can still do, artistically, what I want to do, with a lot of help from my friends.

Q: How do you see the field of dance evolving over the next decade?

A: We might have people getting away from dance as something that comes from very deep within. We might start becoming more technologically oriented, depending on what the world becomes. What's beautiful to me, to this day, is dance that's not overproduced, so that I can actually see the dance. I don't want dance to be overanalyzed, so outside of the inside that it's no longer about our humanity. I don't have a deep fear of that, but we should always be careful and understand what we're doing as human beings, what the gift is. As long as we stay attached to this theme, to the entire spiritual physicality of what dance is, then we'll be all right. ■

The interview with Judith Jamison was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.