

Today's Spotlight

YOUR DAILY ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEW

Dancemaker is at one with the elements

DANCE

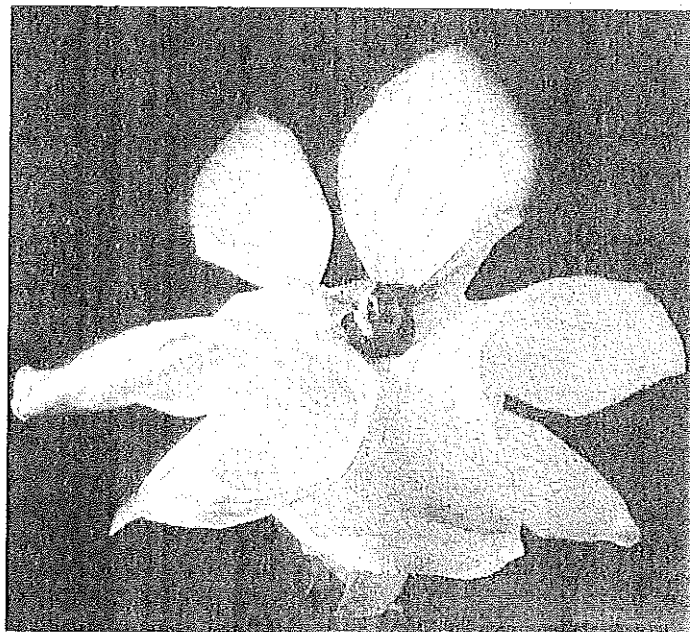
BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Dancer and choreographer Jody Sperling travels with her own personal cloud, which floats around her as she dances. One moment its contours are shaded with golden light. Then it melts into transparency.

Sperling, who presented her lovely and captivating "Dance of the Elements" on Tuesday in the Robert V. Van Fossan Theatre at Bloomfield College, appears dressed in a long, silken robe with a matching cape. The fabric looks so delicate; it seems miraculous that it can survive the dance without tearing. But like a butterfly, whose paper wings brave the hazards of the open field, Sperling's costume is more resilient than it appears.

Lifting it, with wands hidden beneath the folds, Sperling surrounds herself with rippling waves and creates a variety of images derived from nature. She steps daintily from a chrysalis of silk, like a fairy balancing on the lip of a bell-flower, and as the gossamer material changes color under the stage lights, she mimics effects of water, wind and fire.

The choreographer is a devotee of Loie Fuller (1862-1928), the American dancer who achieved international renown and embodied Art Nouveau in Paris during the Gilded Age. Fuller, who was plagued by imitators, took her secrets with her to the grave. Yet



JULIE LEMBERGER

Jody Sperling presents her "Dance of the Elements" at Bloomfield College.

we know she created her effects by shining light from different sources on voluminous fabrics that she manipulated with wands. She was a brilliant innovator, whom her contemporaries described as a "fairy of light."

Sperling's program, which opened with a slide-lecture, made an ideal match for Bloomfield College, where faculty and students in the Creative Arts & Technology program are experimenting with the latest gadgets, including motion-capture.

Fuller was the mother of multimedia. She was the first dancer to perceive the potential of electric light. Fuller replaced perspectival scenery with the black stage curtains we take for granted in theaters today, creating an artificial environment for dances in which she became a giant lily opening to the sun, or was consumed in blazes of fire. She danced on a glass floor lit from below and she used primitive slide projections. Toward the end of her life, she experimented

with film.

Sperling's lecture does a fine job outlining these achievements. Her slides attest to Fuller's impact on contemporary artists who tried to capture her in sculptures and colored lithographs. Sperling's dancing, while gorgeous, is relatively modest in comparison with Fuller's own more elaborate effects, which took place in a thoroughly controlled environment. Sperling's company, Time Lapse Dance, will offer a more extensive program from May 10-12 at the Baryshnikov Art Center in New York.

Employing music by Fuller's contemporaries or their Romantic predecessors (Chopin), Sperling creates a sense of period. Recreating the original context for Fuller's work must challenge any artist today, however. Appearing at the height of European imperialism, Fuller surely was influenced by the art of the Far East, possibly the "skirt" dances of Indian gypsies or Chinese ribbon dances. Fuller, whose vision seems to have penetrated the distant future, kept one foot planted solidly in her own time. Beyond Art Nouveau, she exploited Romantic ideas about the sublime and terrifying power of nature, and echoed the spooky, table-knocking spiritualism of Victorian séances.

She is well worth remembering, as dancers in our own time employ technology to peer ahead.

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