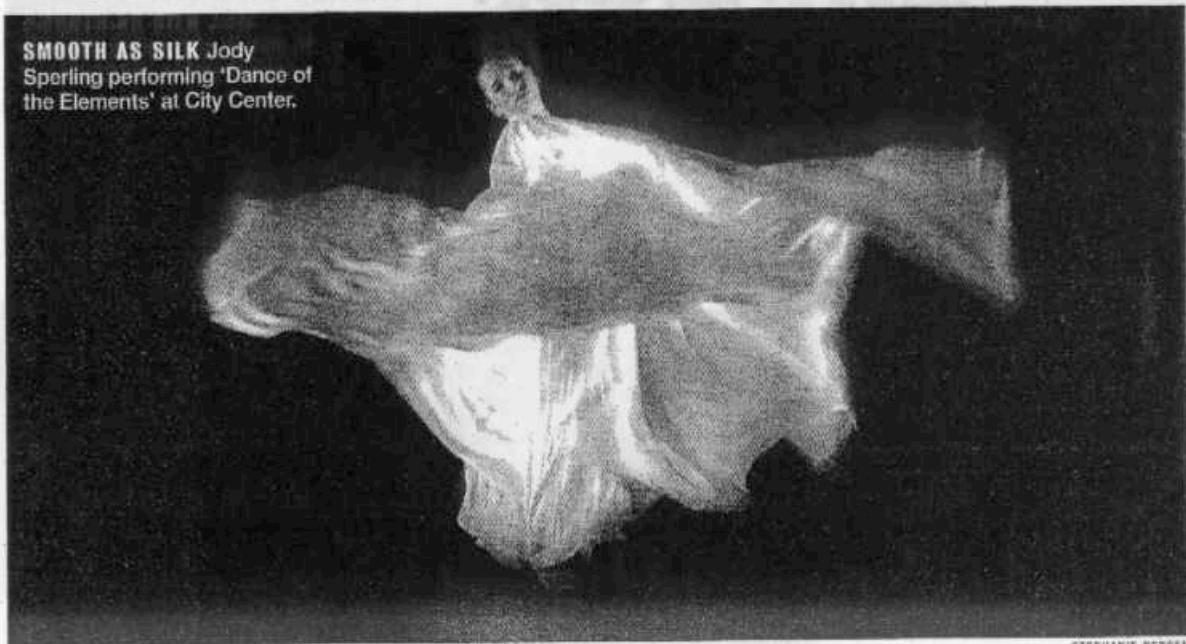


Riotous Good Cheer

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ARTS & LETTERS

SMOOTH AS SILK Jody Sperling performing 'Dance of the Elements' at City Center.



STEPHANIE BERGER

By AERON KOPRIVA

What do slap dance, a clown, modern ballet, and more than 80 yards of white silk have in common? Not much. But they all took the stage Tuesday night at the City Center, when five very different companies kicked off the second annual Fall for Dance Festival.

FALL FOR DANCE FESTIVAL City Center

Designed to lure a new and untapped audience to dance, the festival is a grab-bag of eclecticism that promises to jumble anybody's fixed ideas. A ticket remains only \$10, making Fall for Dance second only to the national minimum wage in its disregard for the rate of inflation (not only is it the proverbial "price of a movie," but these days, it's the price of the popcorn and soda, too.)

Despite its populist mission, the old Shriner temple was chock-full of dance insiders and wealthy donors Tuesday night. A mood of riotous good cheer prevailed, thanks mainly to the first and last works on the program, Black Grace's "Minoi" and Philadanco's "Gate Keepers." Rhythmically entrancing, both performances elicited gasps, rumbles, and shouts, transforming the respectable audience into a crowd at a pep rally.

As soon as the house lights went down, the outline of six Black Grace dancers could be seen onstage. An all-female company from New Zealand, Black Grace fuses traditional Maori dance—known for its strong current of ritual imagery and social engagement—with a contemporary dance vocabulary. In "Minoi" the ensemble stood in long tribal skirts, chanting a Samoan lullaby. Their diaphragms heaved shadows across their muscular torsos as they slowly scooped their arms from one side to another as if carrying the sound with the force of their bodies. The rhythm, counted against their

thighs, captured the syncopation of their native Fa'ataupati, or slap dances. The frenzied, humorous poses recalled the original purpose of the dance as a way to ward off mosquitoes.

In "Gate Keepers," the Philadelphia-based modern dance company Philadanco followed its season at the Joyce with a peak performance of Ronald K. Brown's tour de force. Described as "soldiers walking toward heaven," the work is an epic pilgrimage through multiple landscapes, cratered with large atmospheric interludes. Moving to a propulsive (albeit overloud) electronic score by Wunmi Olaiya, the dancers occupied a monumental space amid columns of dusty light. With the wild control of glyphs, they magically came to life in the stone of a great temple, their movements alternating between violently rhythmic combinations and slow contemplative gestures. At one point, the ensemble stood motionless with arms folded behind backs, watching a single dancer testify with ecstatic motion to the body's natural rhythm.

Upon seeing a sundry program, you are bound to walk away with preferences, and I was no exception. William Forsythe's "Duo," performed by Dorothee Delabie and Amandine Francois of the Ballet de l'Opéra National de Lyon, was a masterful study of momentum, the shallowness and depth of the stage, and time. Unlike many of Mr. Forsythe's other recent pieces, "Duo" never lost its movement in its own process or conceptual ploys. The two dancers, wearing matching leotards of Mr. Forsythe's design—mesh see-through tops, jet black around the waist, and white legs—suggested a ticking clock, powered by the synchronization of their breaths. Occasionally, their arms and legs rocked in unison like a pendulum. But "Duo" was not merely a duet between the hours and minutes: It dealt with

our perception of time itself.

Also enchanting were the optical illusions of Jody Sperling/Time Lapse Dance. In two excerpts from Ms. Sperling's "Dance of the Elements," she recreated the mesmerizing use of fabric first developed by the pioneering modern dancer Loie Fuller. At the turn of the 20th century, Fuller embodied both the virgin and the dynamo. In her spectacle of fabric and light, she combined technology and female sexuality; Thomas Edison even filmed her famous "Butterfly Dance."

Ms. Sperling's elaborate silk drapery produced a billowing wake set to Ravel's "Une barque sur l'océan." Beneath a black light, she manifested orchid-like floral shapes or else revolved quickly in circles like the eye of a storm. As she transitioned, previous movements would ripple toward the hem in physical echoes.

Naturally moved by these performances, I save the worst for last. Bill Irwin's caricature skit, "Untitled," seemed misplaced even among the diverse offerings of Fall for Dance. Mr. Irwin is a celebrity clown who has deservedly won Tony Awards for his comedic productions "Fool Moon" and "Largely New York," as well as for his part in the dramatic revival of last year's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" But his physical comedy reaches its natural limitations in a dance program featuring companies of the highest caliber.

Although I found the piece tedious, meretricious, and smart-alecky to the point of being openly contemptuous of the audience, Mr. Irwin did have a contingent of supporters out there. If the performances run the gamut of quality as well as style—that's the point, right?

The Fall for Dance Festival runs until October 2 (130 W. 56th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, 212-247-0430).