

## *The Hudson Review*, Autumn 2006

### “Retrievals”

by Marcia B. Siegel

[excerpt from pages 443-444]:

Some contemporary thinking would consign all past performance to the realm of the disappeared, where it doesn't have to undergo the test of audience reception. One young dancer-choreographer-scholar, Jody Sperling, has developed a successful postmodern compromise with dance history. Assuming that step-for-step reconstruction is neither possible nor desirable, Sperling's "Time Lapse Dance" appropriates material from concert stage and music hall to recreate bygone entertainments lightly dusted with irony. In her teaching, she gives "compositional exercises of quoting and distorting historical dance sources" as a spur to new choreographic ideas. Sperling's own choreography includes "Inexpensive Trilogy," a low-key vaudeville, consisting of hoop dances, loopy acrobatics, and dancers grappling each other into and out of freak-show knots.

Sperling is best known for her striking replications of the Art Nouveau icon Loie Fuller. Considered one of the precursors of modern dance, Fuller applied her talents as an inventor and businesswoman to her skills as a music hall performer. Her dance was itself an appropriation, an adaptation of the skirt dances of the popular stage. In the late 1800's, women showed off their ankles and shapely calves as they swirled their skirts in suggestive step dances. Loie Fuller's rudimentary dance training and practical temperament didn't suit the commercial stage. Aiming for a more elevated tone, she expanded the skirt into a billowing mass of silk that she could manipulate into spectacular serpentine shapes, ingeniously lit from the sides and below with changing colors. Enveloped in fabric and light, her movement honed to propel the swoops and spirals of the cloth, she disembodied herself. The audience – not yet inured to the visual magic of the cinema – saw ravishing images of flames, butterflies, clouds, flowers, great soaring birds.

Visual artists, sculptors, and graphics designers in fin-de-siecle Paris captured Fuller's rippling, exquisitely tamed imitations of nature. They called her the Fairy of Light. When other art dancers started to imitate her, she struggled to protect her

lighting inventions, the secret of how the wands were sewn into the hundreds of yards of China silk, and the step patterns she devised to produce her effects. Jody Sperling tracked down a detailed verbal script of the *Serpentine Dance* that Fuller used, unsuccessfully, in an 1892 lawsuit to establish copyright protection. But as Sperling understood, it wasn't Fuller's choreography that made her famous, it was her ability to create these surreal animations before the eyes of the audience.

Fuller's *Serpentine* score related a series of images, "not to specific that she'd give it away, says Sperling. "To me, it felt like instructions. Make the shape of a rose falling into pieces. The shape of an umbrella. I just tried to do the shapes that she described, in the sequence she wrote down." Sperling knew the music Fuller had used and fitted it to the movement. Photographs told her how to design the costume, more like a high-waisted dress than the voluminous mantle Fuller devised for her later dances. "It was certainly an interpretation," Sperling says, "but we were going for what she described."

The *Serpentine Dance* is the only Fuller work Sperling has tried to reproduce as a piece of choreography. After staging it in 1999, she became fascinated with Fuller's use of the technology of her time. Magic lantern slides and simple lighting instruments might seem primitive in today's computerized theaters, but for Sperling they prompted new dance inventions. As she worked out Fuller's images she acquired a kind of vocabulary. She learned how to manipulate the huge white silken mantle with plastic wands extending from her arms, to simulate fire, sea foam, a giant lily. Thinking like Fuller, and always guided by Fuller's process, she choreographed new works, including *Debussy Suite* evoking moonlight, a five minute sunset, and fireworks. "What I'm trying to do, " Sperling says, "is really dance. To discover the quality of movement and then make variations on it." Everyone knows the Pierre Roche bronzes, the lamps, the Toulouse-Lautrec lithographs, the woodcuts and wallpapers that Loie Fuller inspired. Jody Sperling's accomplishment is to re-create these static impressions of Fuller and put the life into them.