Twyla Tharp: a taste of everything and a big bite of the Jelly Roll

By Beth Lueck
Tar Heel Contributor

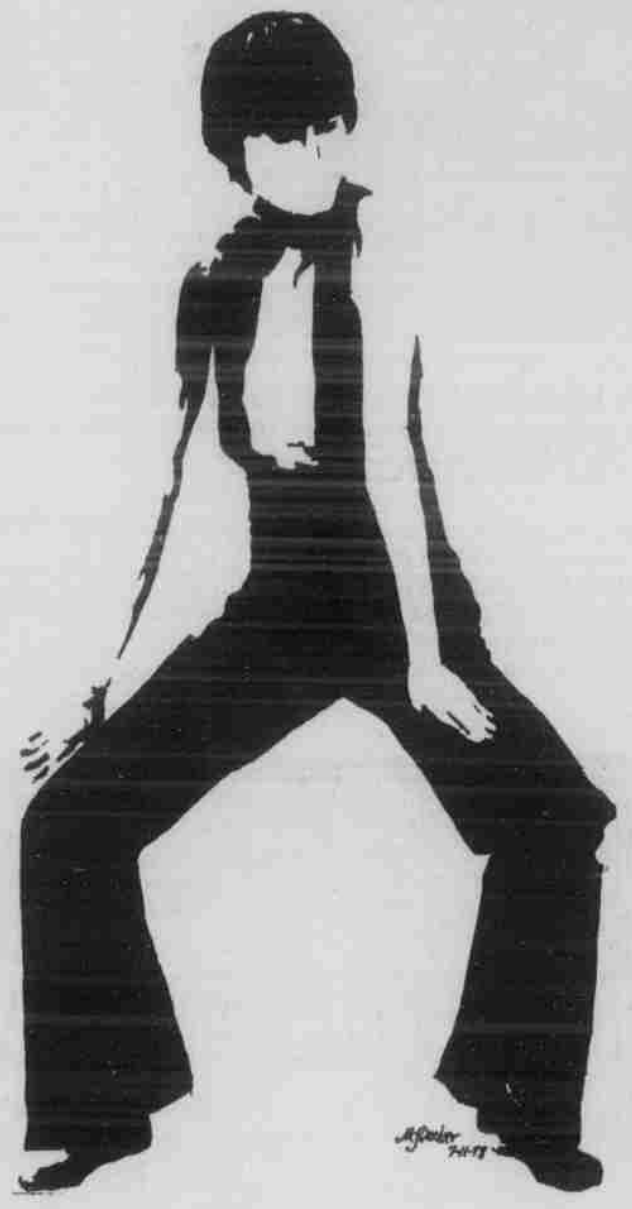
If there is one word to sum up Twyla Tharp, that work must be "energy." From dancers flinging themselves into the fast-paced "Texas Quickstep," to Shelley Washington hurling herself from the wings into the astonished arms of Tom Rawe, to the slinky jazz motions of "Eight Jelly Rolls," the stage is alive with energy, dynamic and charged. Whether to the music of J. S. Bach or Jelly Roll Morton, Tharp's dancers never simply move. They stride coolly, like Rose Marie Wright; they barrel through twists and turns, like Christine Uchida; they jab frenetically with hip and pelvis, like the sensuous Washington.

All this energy is distinctively American, for it derives from an imaginative synthesis of the classic ballet vocabulary with very American dances. Nowhere does this become clearer than in "Eight Jelly Rolls," in which Jelly Roll Morton's blues and rags are interpreted with jazz, stage, tap and blues dancing styles. When dancers step from the black background into the lights, they seem to be stepping out of our musical and theatrical history. Wearing halter-neck black tie in "Blue Blood Blues," Wright and a quartet of chorus girls glide and slink through the number. In "Smoke House Blues" Tharp's comic impulse discovers a tiny, impish drunk in Shelley Washington, whose crazy mugging and limp pratfalls add up to a wildly funny number.

Tharp has also used more contemporary music. Her "Deuce Coupe II" (1973), danced to Beach Boys songs, first brought her work to popular attention (in New York, when the Joffrey ballet danced it.) Last year she added "Simon Medley." She captures the mood of the early '70s with dancers in street clothes rocking to "Feelin' Groovy" and "Me and Julio Down By the School Yard," among others. Compared with the eloquent fusion of dance techniques achieved in "Jelly Rolls," this seems a bit thin. Still, elements of disco, rock, and ballet styles are brought together here to interpret and convey the easy mood of Simon's songs.

Each of Tharp's dancers actually seems to interpret her choreography in his or her own style, for the movements she creates are developed from movements of the dancer's own body. This is clearest in a number such as "The Bach Duet," the most classically based number on the program last Saturday night. While structurally tight, the choreography apparently permits a certain degree of interpretation; when two different couples danced it in separate presentations the same evening, the number actually looked different. A tense, tight pirouette on the smaller body of Uchida grew smooth and sensual on Wright's tall frame. Both numbers were danced in brief white gym outfits, giving "Bach's Duet" an air of the rehearsal room. The quick changes from classically outlined pirouettes to vaudeville hoofing—not to mention the wisecrack of spitting on the floor—added to the casual, even zany mood.

Dances such as "Bach Duet" and "Eight Jelly Rolls" show Twyla Tharp at her best. She dances a fine tightrope between classical ballet, avant-garde modern and American jazz dance, but she is always in good balance, and almost always the synthesis is sharply witty.



by Gary Parks
Dance critic

To watch Twyla Tharp's *Eight Jelly Rolls*, performed last Saturday evening at the American Dance Festival in Durham, is to marvel at how immediately likeable this radical new dancing really is. Most people suspect you can't enjoy Art-with-a-capital-A. It seems to demand a concentration and previous experience a lot of people feel unprepared—and unwilling—to give. But with Tharp you cannot only have your Art, you can enjoy it too.

Eight Jelly Rolls is a suite of dances set to Jelly Roll Morton's great jazz music of the 1920's. Tharp's choreography doesn't try to emulate dancing of that time, nor does it get caught in the "Las Vegas showstopper" style of jazz most familiar today. In its effusion and complex rhythms, and in its seizure of the senses Tharp's dance is as different and as distinct in its milieu as was Morton's music in his. Watching Tharp's company perform *Eight Jelly Rolls* is as exhilarating—and as much fun—as riding a double ferris wheel. With each accelerating swoop you happily grow more and more disoriented. You're slightly breathless at being caught in the middle of so much rapid and unfamiliar motion. And then, with a clank and a thump, it's over.

Rose Marie Wright digs into the first jelly roll, 'Bugaboo", alone. She traces large oval patterns with the ip of her highly polished black shoe, swims her arms .eisurely in the air. Every so often a shrug is added, or mayb a high ballet extension. On a cue from two bleating trombones Jennifer Way and Shelley Washington haltingly cross the back of the stage. They exit, then are back on again in a minute, reversing their agitated steps. Wright ignores them, continuing her unhurried dance with herself. When she finishes, she walks off.

Way and Washington then hurtle on for a super-fast "Shreveport Stomp." They pound, leap, and tap their way around the stage, mugging at the audience, playing—Washington runs an imaginary tape measure down Way's back, as though sizing her up for a coffin—attacking the dance like you wouldn't believe. At the end they stop abruptly and saunter off stage. The audience doesn't know what hit it. To "Mournful Serenade" Jennifer Way next dances a blues solo so beautiful you just sit there and admire. The movements are all full and weighty, like an endless ribbon of thick taffy. Way is so right for the dance I can't imagine any of the other women in the company doing it. The shimmies melting into slippery turns are all treated equally by Way. She doesn't punch the steps in order to sell them to the audience. Instead she slides into the phrases with a continuous, restrained eloquence that carries the piece seamlessly from beginning to end.

After a frenetic rag, Shelley Washington dances the drunk role in "Smoke House Blues" which Tharp originally choreographed for herself. A brisk corps in the background makes a fine counterpoint to Washington's loose-jointed inebriation. Washington's act is hilarious. She knows successful imitation of a drunkard depends on showing how he's really attempting to walk normally. The lurches and falls are unfortunate mistakes the boozer tries to hide. Washington treats her loss of balance seriously, never hamming up the stumbles so they become caricature. The laughs she gets are as much for what she doesn't do as for what she does.

Throughout all of *Eight Jelly Rolls* the dancers keep their distance from the audience and, in a sense, from the dance as well. There's no "Subject" to the dancing other than the steps themselves. Those occasional lapses, like waving a hand at the audience, only serve to point this out. *Eight Jelly Rolls* is all the stronger because of this abstraction. The timeless appeal of the music is more pronounced. Detachment is common to all Tharp dances; its use here is particularly striking.

Sly over head in F.I.S.T.

By Harry Smith
Tar Heel Contributor

I am not sure what Norman Jewison thinks he has accomplished with his new movie, "F.I.S.T.," now playing at South Square. It describes the thirty year rise to power of a fictional labor union called the Federation of Interstate Truckers. The focus is on a truck loader named Johnny Kovak (Sylvester Stallone) who, through an organizing career marked by a combination of good-intentioned but mafia-stained practices, is able to push the union to the point that it "owns everything on wheels." He is eventually brought before a Senate Investigating Committee and, finally, disappears in the manner of Jimmy Hoffa.

"F.I.S.T." is certainly not good history. It is rather the use of history for another end; probably in Jewison's case, what he hopes to be a good story. Today there is no more prevalent a theme than that of the corruption of those in power. Even in the labor movement, where an informed view shows there is less over-all corruption, to find it occurring is no novelty. It would seem that investigation of how and why it does occur would be valuable, but "F.I.S.T." does not really do any vigorous searching of such questions. It barely tells more than what most people think they already know. One is given a sometimes moving but basically shallow explanation. The emergence and disappearance of a man like Hoffa remains a mystery.

The first half of the movie is fairly convincing. Laszlo Kovac's photography creates a strong sense of the industrial 1930's. The abhorrent working conditions are shown in their extreme and yet do not seem exaggerated. The characters of both the workers and the company officials are portrayed without distortion.

However, when Jewison moves on to the 1950's, there is a virtual collapse of verisimilitude. Whereas before the movie's pace is relaxed enough to allow for reasonable development of the action, events begin to speed by in a sloppy and incomplete fashion. The result is an unfortunate simplification of labor relations. Bargaining sessions, convention scenes, mafia dealings become as persuasive and insightful as a six o'clock newsreel.

The story begins with considerable success. Johnny Kovak's leadership seems needed and justified, and Sylvester Stallone has the physical presence and youthful intensity to believably assume the task. There is a particularly effective scene which takes place in the union assembly hall where Kovak, through the force of his personality, is able to install a fierce, righteous anger in the truckers. Unfortunately when the story moves into the modern era, Jewison loses not only realism but also a grip on the narrative. Simple incongruities hurt as much as anything else. Some people age appropriately; others, like Stallone, are given a touch of grey, padding around the middle and a croaky voice. The romantic involvements which were well developed at first are now continued with what appears to be only obligatory insertions.

Most telling is Stallone's ability to make the transition. Although the makeup and dialogue doesn't make it easy for him, it is clear that he has moved beyond his range. Stallone's variety of the ethnic stereotype cannot be translated into a man whose motivations must be more than simple. Whether because of his rather inexpressive eyes or voice that is beginning to sound less than inspired or novel, this half-Fonz, half-Brando does not travel farther than the physical.

It is a pity that Stallone must be compared to Brando. He does not go the distance. The weak, presumptive echoes that result only raise one's estimation of the latter's talents. Compare the taxi cab scene with Brando and Steiger in "On the Waterfront" with Stallone's pre-fight "I'm just a bum" soliloquy in "Rocky." Compare Brando's Godfather with the shoe-polish temples and sandpaper voice of Johnny Kovak.

Nevertheless, "F.I.S.T." is a movie worth seeing. The better part of it is reasonably informative, and there are dramatic moments which are well done. Supporting actors such as Rod Steiger, Melinda Dillon, Peter Boyle and Kevin Conway contribute memorable performances. It is a long movie, and even if one were to leave before the shift to the modern era, one would have managed to see something long enough as well as entertaining.