

# DANCING

## Experiments

THE Tap Dance Theatre of Gail Conrad represents a kind of post-romantic view of the art of tap dancing; it says that tap needn't always be genial and naïvely optimistic and high-spirited, and that its survival into the eighties isn't an anachronism. Conrad's kind of tap dancing asks to be identified with new-wave forms of expression in music and pop-world manners; it seeks out other truths in the medium than the perennial ones, which no music is being written nowadays to support. I think those truths exist in the mechanics of tap and have always existed—Astaire alluded to them in certain of his solos which have an almost surly force—but they have the flavor of decadence about them. The post-romantic phase in tap is like the twilight of the Romantic era in ballet. By the time of "Coppélia," the bright day of the immortal and ethereal ballerina had dimmed. The mechanics of pointwork had once reinforced an image of otherworldly grace; now, in "Coppélia," they revealed something in the very nature of points that was not superhuman so much as inhuman—automatic and shrill. Historically speaking, metaphysical truth in ballet flowed from tragedy to comedy; in tap it flows from comedy (from, specifically, musical comedy, which is Gail Conrad's poetic point of origin) to tragedy—to the perception that all is not wonderfully well between the sexes and right with the world.

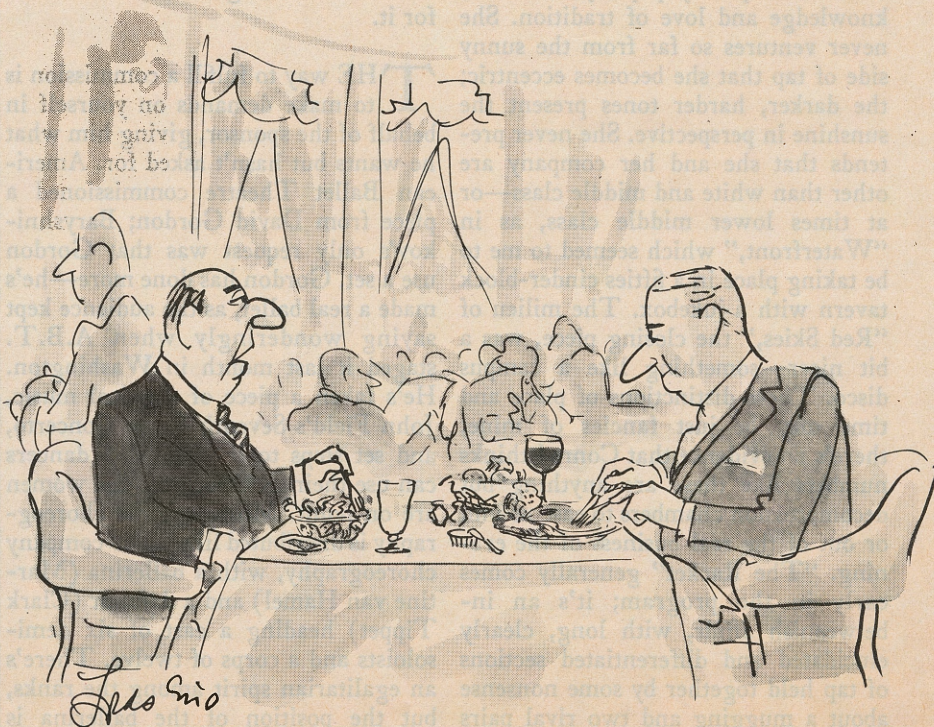
The question that Gail Conrad's theatre raises is not whether tap can sustain these perceptions; it's whether it can sustain them as a tap story—as a continually evolving cause-and-effect structure of meaning generating power and excitement from the discipline of the form. If I come away uncertain of the answer, it's because too much of what Gail Conrad is doing these days tends to separate the meanings from the form—to have tap be only a convention that contains some very loosely codified physical movement of a kind meant to convey the real significance of characters and situations. This auxiliary, quasi-dramatic modern-dance element is always in danger of preempting the tap monologues and duologues and choruses, but one almost wouldn't mind if it did as long as it could make *something* clear to us which tap could then go on to amplify and explain. In her most

recent performances, at Marymount Manhattan Theatre, Conrad seemed to have got things the wrong way around. She glided from situations to hang dances on (her most effective tactic) into situational turns and twists that became events in themselves. While we puzzled over the nature of these events, the tapping dwindled into ineffectual expostulation or silence. She helped us out, as usual, with props and scenery and bits of soundtrack atmosphere, but these hints seemed always too few or too many, and her sense of costume was arbitrary as ever—usually the same basic outfits are worn from piece to piece.

"Beyond the Bases," the most ambitiously atmospheric number, was the most obscure. A couple of baseball players meet a sunbather ostensibly for a picnic. (They have tap-dance adventures instead.) Then it rains, and three ghosts—girls dressed as baseball players—appear and keep appearing. Clearly, "baseball" and "picnic" are only allusions to a context. But Conrad means to do more than evoke long summer days and adolescent reveries. She lost me with those ghosts. They didn't fit into the picture I thought I had recognized, and they weren't inte-

grated in such a way as to form a new picture. "Beyond the Bases" fizzled; it didn't turn sour, like another new piece, "Scotch and Soda." This started as a challenge duet with sexual overtones and became increasingly and pointlessly argumentative. Working against the clichés of the form may create tensions, but one can't replace the stylized repartee of the tap duet with "real" dialogue without working against the *clarity* of the form. One might add that the challenge dance is a star turn. David Parker is an ingratiating performer and Kathryn Tufano an able technician, but neither has the virtuosity or the star personality to fill out the roles and make us understand what these two people are to each other. (They look mismatched, but that happens not to be a factor in the argument.)

Gail Conrad's success has been in collecting what she had to say as a witty and resourceful tap-dance choreographer inside theme plays (not narratives) that she writes herself. Her "Wave" (1981), which had to do with middle-class suburban values coming unstuck in the midst of a natural disaster, had a satirical theme that related admirably to the nervous, jittery appeal of tap dancing. One saw the hypothetical point of tap in "Mission," a science-fiction fantasy created two years later, but here it was the



*"I've learned to live without a lot of things, Herb, but money isn't one of them."*



production values that came unstuck; the parts of an intricately conceived jigsaw puzzle gravitated toward each other but never locked into place. In relation to scenic and plot elements there was too little dancing, too little of which depended on the features of tap. And that's been the problem with just about every other "story" piece Conrad has done. Her style is innately dramatic, but it's the style of dance-as-drama; it's not dance drama in the linear, sequential terms she's shown such a great interest in since "Mission." Presenting tap dancers as characters can only be a ploy, after all, and Conrad is currently acknowledging that fact in her best pieces, which have little or no story frame. The Marymount Manhattan program opened with one of these pieces and closed with another—ingenious, relaxed, glistening tap toccatas in which Conrad herself performs as a member of the ensemble.

Drama, of course, is produced from contrast, which is a function of rhythm. When I say Gail Conrad is dramatic, I mean she's rhythmically prolific to a degree that promotes extreme possibilities of color and expansion in her material. It's easy to see how she has become interested in a storytelling tap theatre. Among the lively contrasts of the form as she pursues it, the liveliest is the one in her sensibility between her responsiveness to a contemporary pop style and her knowledge and love of tradition. She never ventures so far from the sunny side of tap that she becomes eccentric; the darker, harder tones present the sunshine in perspective. She never pretends that she and her company are other than white and middle class—or at times lower middle class, as in "Waterfront," which seemed to me to be taking place in a fifties cinder-block tavern with a jukebox. The milieu of "Red Skies," the closing piece, was a bit nicer—something like a campus disco. These distinctions of place and time may be just fancies of mine; there's no evidence that Conrad thinks numbers like these are anything but decompression chambers to ease us into or out of the real business of the evening. "The Racket" generally comes early in the program; it's an in-betweenish affair, with long, clearly elucidated and differentiated sections of tap held together by some nonsense about a mugging and two rival pairs of crooks seeking to do each other out of the booty. Even though "The Racket" is a theme play that reads very

clearly (and is only thirteen minutes long), it's not a favorite Conrad piece of mine. Somehow, the patently artificial pretext betrays her into pertness and inconsistency. The vividness of the mugging (we see the victim spread-eagled on the ground with her dress over her head) clashes with the stylized "apache" swagger of the dancing, with the berets and raincoats and the air of Montmartre chic. And the payoff—the victim coming alive, gunning down the crooks, retrieving her purse, and then replanting herself face down as a lure for the next thief—raises more questions than it answers. It also seems a great mistake, a lapse in form, not to have the victim dance, especially since she turns out to be the controlling force.

Conrad's dance music, arranged by Ernest Provencher, is live, and it is support music, nothing more. In the days when she was availing herself of stock tunes and classical tags, she got more heft from a phrase. If only a tune would surface now! The skeletal, intermittent scores of Provencher are discreet, but they don't supply much impetus. Is it a coincidence that Conrad's scenarios started to thicken at the same time that she turned to custom-made music? Like John Curry, whose ice shows are a mite too jealous of ballet, she's trying to do things with the form that probably can't be done. And needn't be. Conrad's work in tap is more interesting than her ambitions for it.

THE way to fulfill a commission is to make demands on yourself in behalf of the sponsor, giving him what he wants but hasn't asked for. American Ballet Theatre commissioned a piece from David Gordon; Baryshnikov's only request was that Gordon use a set. Gordon has done more—he's made a real ballet, as the audience kept saying wonderingly when A.B.T. staged it last month in Washington. He's taken a piece of classical music, John Field's Seventh Piano Concerto, and set steps to it that ballet dancers can use their technique on; the women are on point. Moreover, the choreography is distributed like ballet-company choreography, with a ballerina (Martine van Hamel) and a danseur (Clark Tippet) heading a cast of six demi-soloists and a corps of twelve. There's an egalitarian spirit among the ranks, but the position of the ballerina is never in doubt. Where Gordon breaks the rules is in his treatment of stage space. He doesn't layer the ranks with

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the queen on top. He doesn't divide the stage into sectors of influence or open up dramatic depths; he simply doesn't see it as an enclosed arena at all. The choreography passes right across the stage, with the dancers—starting with a long solo trill for van Hamel—entering at the left and exiting at the right, and never crossing back. The entrées, set to the first movement of the concerto, have their own spatial logic. Instead of dramatizing a constant space, they keep negotiating with a fluid one, creating a select series of happenings almost all of which are completed before the next series begins. It will be interesting to see how this modest, debonair idea works on the larger stage of the Met when the piece, which is called "Field, Chair and Mountain," is presented there this spring. At the Kennedy Center, it was like seeing pictures on a Japanese screen slipping across the stage.

The piece is about partnering. The six demisolists are divided into three pairs, the corps into six pairs. In Part I, Gordon switches pairs about, combines them, separates them. He demonstrates partnering in pairs as a ceremony of mutual danger, tact, and courtesy; he shows a lift or a supported leap as an event with a clear impulse and a resolution; he shows a cluster of lifts and leaps repeating and reversing themselves in a web of consequence. In the second part (to the second and final movement of the concerto), he begins a new game—partnering with chairs. The folding chairs (he has used them before, in other pieces) are comic relief, but they're serious play, too. As the dancers swing themselves through and over the chairs, line them up, sit down or stand on them or suddenly change places, they put themselves through rigorous drillwork in three-quarter time. Pairs then conjoin over a chair, and the partnering begins again, repeating some of the permutations of the first part, with some of the same air of tender consideration. The climaxes start piling up in the ensemble work and then in the stars' pas de deux. Tippet partners van Hamel from a sitting position as she does chaîné turns around him; he promenades her as she carries a chair or they carry it between them; finally and unforgettably, standing high on her chair, van Hamel promenades on point, swinging a magisterial leg over Tippet's head.

For all its thin watercolor texture, there's a lot going on in "Field, Chair and Mountain." The first object in the title, a pun on the composer's name,

refers to a rock field that appears behind the dancers in Part I. Santo Loquasto designed it in accordion folds that open laterally as the dancers traverse the stage—a parody of the Japanese-screen idea in the choreography. In Part II, Loquasto contributes a backcloth depicting mountain peaks dotted with folding chairs. What with the Victorian laciness of the music, and the etiquette and the extremity of the choreography, this mad picture of Loquasto's, which appears in the final minutes, seems to release a fragrance of barmy gentility that permeates the whole ballet. "Field, Chair and Mountain" is the kind of folly that advances to the limits of frivolity on the strength of passion.

Ballet Theatre has also acquired Balanchine's "Donizetti Variations." I saw it danced before the Gordon premiere by Marianna Tcherkassky and Danilo Radojevic, who hadn't yet worked out their approach to the principal roles. The ballerina role, one of the very few in the Balanchine catalogue which never once pay homage to the image enshrined by the Romantic era, is extremely difficult, especially the adagio portion. There's a tinge of perversity in the steps, which honor technique at the expense of beauty (Balanchine may have had in mind some of the armor-plated Italian ballerinas of the nineties), and it isn't the kind of technique that gets applause. The variations are more gratifying, but even these have a spoof element, which is matched in the principal male role. The characterizations in "Donizetti Variations" are so subtle that the ballet can be done straight. As in the A.B.T. performance (once the tricky adagio was over), it still succeeds. But then the more broadly drawn supporting cast—long-suffering, highly competitive—steals the show.

—ARLENE CROCE

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