

## DANCEWATCHING

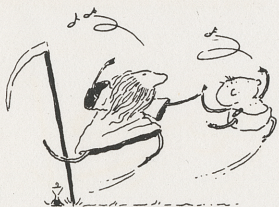
IMPORT-BALLET BOOM,  
LOCAL DANCE CRISIS

By LEWIS SEGAL

For well-heeled balletomanes, 1986 offered a rare chance to see all four major American companies (New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Joffrey Ballet) on local stages and to appraise them against the near-legendary but scarcely incomparable Kirov Ballet of Leningrad.

However, for intrepid audiences following the fortunes of local choreographers and companies, the year brought something approaching the death of Los Angeles dance.

With the House studio theater in Santa Monica sold off, no decent, low-cost venue now remains avail-



able where companies can produce their work. Moreover, the disintegration of the Los Angeles Area Dance Alliance leaves the dance community without essential services, organized advocacy or a forum for unified action.

Below is a personal, month-by-month dance calendar for 1986: memorable occasions (not all of them happy) for one observer.

**JANUARY:** Against all odds, **Los Angeles Chamber Ballet** launched an invigorating if over-ambitious attempt to become a genuine resident company. It danced a varied repertory on many local stages during the year, but "The Little Prince" (Japan America Theatre) represented the biggest risk and most remarkable achievement. In its design, score, movement influences and collaborative method, this full-length story ballet reflected a distinctive L.A.-in-the-mid-'80s sensibility, an attempt at complete creative independence.

**FEBRUARY:** **Meredith Monk**

and **Ping Chong's** overblown multimedia spectacle "The Games" at Royce Hall represented a perfect specimen of a creative disease now prevalent in modern dance. Characterized by extreme conceptual bloat and a dangerous loss of self-perception, it might well be called "Toxic BAM Syndrome," since the Brooklyn Academy of Music "Next Wave" performance series has been a key source of infection. This year the malady also afflicted **Molissa Fenleyeq** (the last half of "Geologic Moments") and **Trisha Brown** ("Lateral Pass," not a BAM production though it exhibited all the symptoms).

**MARCH:** The American Ballet Theatre revival of **Antony Tudor's** "Dim Lustre" probed the influence of memory on a relationship though fluid contrasts between past and present, genuine versus conditioned responses. This glittering ballroom-ballet was judged merely minor Tudor 43 years ago, but even in a bungled restaging at Shrine Auditorium it displayed a level of creative ambition and accomplishment that puts much contemporary choreography to shame.

**APRIL:** Out of the familiar non-stop stretch-and-turn, dodge-and-swoop of postmodern formalism, **David Gordon and his Pickup Company** conjured up astonishingly vivid image systems at the Wadsworth Theater. Visions of dusty cowhands and windblown sagebrush in "Four Man/Nine Lives," of Jewish scarf-dances and wedding canopies in "My Folks," materialized from the dancers' limbs and costumes only to mutate or vanish an instant later. Genius. . .

**MAY:** The Kirov was at the Shrine, the Joffrey at the Pavilion, Dance Theatre of Harlem at the Pasadena Civic, Momix at the Wadsworth, the Kita Noh Company at the Japan America Theatre, the Jazz Tap Ensemble at L.A. Theatre Center and Stephanie Skura at LACE—Los Angeles hadn't experienced a month like this since the



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Olympic Arts Festival. But long after they were gone, "Tango Argentino" was still running at the Pantages, and nothing in 1986 dance proved more perfectly performed or more widely influential.

**JUNE:** After an 11-month absence from local stages, the **Rudy Perez** dancers reasserted their primacy in "Cold Sweat" at the Plaza de la Raza. Perez has always been a master at distilling societal pressures into formal movement theater and he has never more compellingly objectified a sense of imminent social collapse than in this pitiless, post-Chernobyl action-painting of desperate, directionless hyperactivity.

**JULY:** **Tim Miller** got plenty of print about the intimate revelations in his autobiographical performance art vehicle, "Buddy Systems" at the Cast-in-the-Circle Theatre. But in all the fuss made by the dance press (including this writer) about truth-telling and/or self-obsession, practically nobody mentioned how brilliantly he moved. For the record, then: By itself, Miller's explosively instinctual dancing was enough to confirm his stature as a major artist.

**AUGUST:** With its intriguing juxtaposition of percussive dance idioms—American tap, Spanish flamenco and Indian kathak—the evening called "Sole Music" at Los Angeles Theatre Center exemplified a sense of creative curatorship rare in local sampler programming. "The Lewitzky Legacy" a month later proved it was no fluke: The Theatre Center has acquired a

bona-fide dance impresario and his name is **Michael Alexander**.

**SEPTEMBER:** Sanctified by Nigerian, Japanese, Hawaiian and Native American rituals, the ground-breaking ceremonies for the \$17.5-million Dance Gallery downtown also enlisted representatives of the beleaguered local dance community in a choreographed statement of solidarity. After 26 California companies each presented a one-minute dance excerpt or a new work of that length, all the participants returned in a three-minute piece by **Bella Lewitzky** that stitched together key themes of their minidances. A civic event that made everyone feel part of a family.

**OCTOBER:** On an all-Balanchine program by **New York City Ballet** at the Orange County Performing Arts Center, **Darci Kistler** steadily, smoothly, artlessly uncoiled from a tight nose-to-knee

contortion on pointe into a sky-sweeping extension. She looked as natural and as magical in this passage from the second movement of "Symphony in C" as a time-lapse film of flowers opening to the light. This was Balanchine's famous "ballet is woman" dictum embodied at full glory, and we certainly needed it in the month that **Gelsey Kirkland's** book, "Dancing on My Grave," hit the best-seller lists with its devastating perspective on Balanchine's methods and their tragic consequences (among other subjects).

**NOVEMBER:** **Paul Taylor's** company assimilated his innovations so effortlessly in one Royce Hall program that it was easy to grow complacent. Haven't we always seen lyrical gymnastics like the flow of soft vaults into powerful lifts that were a fixture of his neo-Romantic "Roses?" No, we haven't, not until now. Doesn't every choreographer inexorably expand intimate gestures of self-hate or disgust into uncompromisingly harrowing group statements as in "Last Look?" No, they don't. However, many of them now do set athletic non-dance moves against Baroque music exactly as Taylor did in "Esplanade" 11 years ago, so give them time.

**DECEMBER:** After the end of the invaluable "Explorations" series, a new sponsor, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, became a local presenter in the National Performance Network—a project giving American audiences access to major experimental dance and performance art. The first NPN import was **Ishmael Houston-Jones**, who brought his deeply felt, improvisational form of postmodern black dance: timeless themes of social justice and personal witness expressed in the evolving movement language of the moment. □