The (Im)Pure Theatre of Twyla Tharp

By James Leverett

In what may be New York's worst theatre season since the founding of the Republic, some have sought comfort in the presence of Peter Brook's *Carmen*. An argument, occasionally passionate to the point of rowdiness, has developed, its sides drawn clearly along lines of artistic allegiance: The opera camp judges the voices less than first rate and, much worse, deplores Bizet's score stripped down, jerked around, diminished and dishonored. Their opposition marvels at what they imagine to be the primitive passion of the original tale restored in the hands of youthful, vibrant singing actors. Gone are the massive mezzos who can neither dance nor make love credibly no matter how well they hit the notes. Ditto the superannuated baritones who can't fight bulls either. Theatre has reclaimed something of its own. Praise its direct, vital immanence!

For the many who love the theatre and the production, *Carmen* is a kind of victory. But the significance of the battle can only be measured against the extent of the war. As we round the corner into the '80s and begin to glimpse the shape of the arts in this generation, a remarkable shift of territory becomes evident. Looking at the total picture, Brook's conquest at the Vivian Beaumont is worthy but small. If for a moment we can indulge in the fallacy of considering theatre as something finite and measurable, we can almost see it leak out of its own precincts into those around it. As the art of theatre shrinks—as it most assuredly is doing right now both in amount and scope—the arts around it swell with theatricality.

Only occasionally, for example in the "poor theatre" of Grotowski or in Beckett's minimalism (or Brook's own "empty space," though he is far more pragmatically eclectic), has an attempt been made to reduce theatre to its own essence. Usually theatre is not only polluted, because it freely partakes in the other arts, but it also pollutes. Critics frequently judge other arts according to how much of this "foreign substance" they contain. Abstract painting is pure insofar as it does not imitate the theatre of external reality. Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, a keystone of romanticism, is *im*pure because it follows a program—indeed, an explicit drama. Even Robert Bresson, the apostle of film, that art generally considered theatre's next of kin, complains of "the terrible habit of theatre."

Some ages tolerate theatrical "contamination" more than others, but this one less than most—until quite recently, that is. Visual artists, now done with the abstraction and increasingly self-conscious cool intellectuality of the previous generation, on the one hand admit a "new realism" and "new expressionism" into their work and on the other involve themselves deeply with performance art. "New romanticism" is shaking music free of an academism that has beset it for years and composers are taking fresh looks at dramatic forms such as opera. As inadequate and trendy as these terms might be, they connote a fresh willingness to allow these arts to be histrionic, to become stages once more on which concepts like action, character, place and history have some currency. Even the sometime art of literary criticism, as practiced in the newest schools of deconstruction, brings elements of performance and theatricality into its discussions of fiction and poetry.

Add to these developments the immeasurable influence of popular entertainment, particularly as transmitted through the innately theatrical means of the electronic media, and you have a theatre of the world quite apart from and mostly indifferent to the world of theatre.

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So far I have left dance out of this discussion, because I want to make it a case in point. I found more theatre in the recent season of Twyla Tharp's company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music than I have in months of playgoing. And I mean *theatre*, as glorious as the dancing was.

Like other choreographers who began their careers in the late '60s and early '70s, Tharp saw the proper study of dance as dance: the physics of bodies moving through space and time. Drama, or better, "the dramatic," was admissible only as an abstract dynamic, frequently fragmented, deprived of name, place and history. Theatre was out: A magnificently sloppy drunk might stagger out of the wings for the sheer fun of collision, as happens in the *Eight Jelly Rolls*, but there were to be no more sleeping beauties or dying swans.

Now, however, as arguably the premiere American choreographer of her generation, Tharp is charting a new course. She has turned the tables on both dance and theatre, while having her cake and eating it, too (a combination well within her range, as well as that of any of her wonderfully gifted company). Before it became an autonomous art form, mainly in this century, dance was one of those things that happened *within* theatre—usually part of what Aristotle called the spectacle. Tharp has made the theatre just one of the components of dance.

It all comes together in a piece called *Fait Accompli*, one of the great hits of the current season and perhaps a seminal creation of the '80s. Divided into two parts, the work operates on many different levels, the most innovatively compelling being the social and historical. As an "accomplished fact" it is for its creator both an artistic and personal recapitulation—but a retrospective so energetic and incisive that it contains the future as well.

Without being in any way a dry catalog of past achievements, the first part draws on the huge repertoire of movement that Tharp has absorbed and mastered over the years—a compendium that her fans know includes everything from ballet to baton twirl-