

Tharp's way: tricky as gridiron

ARTS

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Twyla Tharp is an extraordinary choreo-grapher. But she is difficult. As difficult to follow as a complex gridiron play, her work is very difficult to dance. American Ballet Theatre dancers had to invent a new vocabulary to dance her great work from the '70s, *Push Comes to Shove*.

"I gotta spin-spin sinkdown bunny," said one. Another: "I gotta spin bunny-bunny curtain call." Tharp is the mistress of the squiggle, the pelvic roll, the slink, the jump-one-way-but-change-my-mind-mid-air-and-go-back. Her work can be sculptural and slow-mo, but more often fast and propulsive. Tharp dancers high-kick, shimmy, shake their own hands as if they are water-logged, shrug their shoulders and jog backward. In between, they must be technically skilled enough to execute tricky, bouncy, 19th-century ballet steps such as turning jetes.

This is the Tharpian way, hers is a unique language. Even if she made nothing more, Tharp would stand above most of her contemporaries as one of the most innovative and creative choreographers of 20th-century dance.

Under the banner of Tharp!, she sent 11 young dancers to the Sydney Festival and Adelaide seasons (just concluded). They were all terrific exponents of her style - energetic, generous, committed. Although the phrasing in Tharp's works seems long and flowing, every movement was sharp and clean. We had not seen focused dancing like this in Sydney since Tharp's former colleague, Mikhail Baryshnikov, brought his *White Oak Project* here a few years ago.

Why, then, did Tharp! receive a less than rapturous reception in Sydney?

First problem: the Capitol Theatre. It's dance unfriendly; the stage too remote; the auditorium not raked enough for intimacy.

Second problem: programming. The first of two Sydney programs (each of three works) opened with *Heroes* which took itself very seriously indeed. A bad beginning and it was long - far too long - for such repetitive choreography.

In the 1970s, Tharp gave us jokes. In the 1990s, is she giving us meaning?

Heroes is propelled by the music of her favourite composer, Philip Glass, with whom she collaborated on the brilliant *In the Upper Room*. It's about contests, rejection and final acceptance, with lots of punchy, martial arts moves. It ends with a woman hurling herself continually on the rejecting "wall" of an underwear-clad trio of men, one of whom carries her off. This contest dancing is similar to Tharp's cool *The Storyteller*, commissioned by the Australian Ballet last year.

Heroes' pomposity meant the often elegiac Sweet Fields, which followed, looked gorgeous in comparison, yet a little facile in its showing in a second program. Tharp has envisaged heavenly harmony and communal ecstasy to American 18th-century hymns and Shaker hymns in these flowing ensembles for 11 dancers. The highlight was a procession of six men, its progress across the stage one of sculptural beauty, with each man held aloft in turn, like a corpse with his pallbearers and a chief mourner, lamenting in front.

The first program ended with a bit of fun, 66, in honour of Route 66, shown as a piece of highway in a cartoon backdrop, with '50s music. It's all enlivened by a marvellous solo in Gene Kelly style by Shawn Mahoney and a reckless, breathtaking final duo by Julie Stahl and Andrew Robinson.

Roy's Joys, the second program opener, was a deceptively easy-looking piece of joyous dancing to Roy Eldridge's 1940s and '50s music, marked by a continual return by the nine dancers to a diagonal line of their bodies, like a starting block from which they could repeat their visualisation of Eldridge's soaring trumpet.

But the heart of the entire season was The Fugue (1970), danced by Robinson, Jay Franke and Matt Rivera in plain white shirts and dark trousers, to no music whatsoever on a similarly plain "set", the skeletal shabbiness of the backstage laid bare. The three danced as if working on an internal, demanding series of puzzles they must endlessly practise. The only sounds were claps, jumps, stamps, slaps, and a spoken "1, 2, 3, 4" - the intro to another bit of the puzzle.

Pure, 100 per cent Tharp. Difficult, yes, but totally exhilarating.