



Modern Ballet: ADF Continues

by Kate Dobbs Ariail

July 2, 2009, Durham, NC: The [Aspen Santa Fe Ballet](#), a crowd favorite at last year's [American Dance Festival](#), has returned to explore the ADF 2009 theme, "Where Ballet and Modern Meet," with its four-candy-box of a dance program at the Durham Performing Arts Center. We get to sample first ballets by modern choreographers (from 30-35 years ago) and then recent works by ballet choreographers with modern sensibilities.

Twyla Tharp's 1975 dance *Sue's Leg*, set to a medley of Fats Waller songs, leads off the evening. As part of its increasing concern with preserving knowledge of important modern dances, the ADF initiated this new production of Tharp's piece, which had not been performed for more than 20 years. It is a charming piece, warm-toned like the amber and ochre-tinted costumes and backdrop, and very pleasant to watch, although it seemed somehow muffled in performance. Its virtuosity is so off-hand as to efface itself; sometimes the dancers' imitation of ordinary folks is a little too convincing. Tharp's edginess now seems as soft as the soft-shoe vaudeville-scented routines, despite all those angular postures and flexed feet and off-center balancing.

The ADF also arranged for the reconstruction of Laura Dean's 1980 work *Night*, and its first performance took place on July 2. Dean choreographed this piece for the Joffrey Ballet, and ASFB artistic director Tom Mossbrucker was in that cast. I can't compare his reconstruction to the original, but this version dazzles. Eight dancers in dark olive pajamas whirl through Dean's spinning patterns with gorgeous precision as her repetitive minimalist music builds through its mathematical changes. As if all that turning energy were being fed through a differential in a mystic drive-train, the force suddenly switches into sideways leaping until the curtain falls. To my eye, this on-pointe ballet variation on Dean's modern dances is far more satisfying than the barefoot type. The added elevation and longer line of the ballerinas and, more especially, the visual richness added by the tiny circles they inscribe with their pointe shoes make this dance beautiful. The crispness of the dancing makes it exhilarating.

Beautiful in a different way is William Forsythe's *pas de deux* from *Slingerland* (2000), danced to Gavin Bryars' String Quartet No. 1. Choreographed and lit to emphasize shape over relationship, it makes you aware of the dancers as sculptural forms. Like sculpture, they activate the space around themselves, and the space itself then becomes the subject of our contemplation — a study promoted by Forsythe's lighting design, which sometimes has them dancing in the dark.

The evening closes with the newest work, Jorma Elo's *Red Sweet*, which ASFB commissioned and premiered a year ago. Although set to music by Vivaldi and Biber, *Red Sweet* is entirely contemporary in tone. It makes a good opposite bookend for the Tharp piece — its attitude is a little edgy for today's take on ballet. Where *Sue's Leg* is full of vaudeville, soft-shoe and buck dance idioms, *Red Sweet* uses entertainment sources like clowning and marionettes to inform its movement sequences. It doesn't have much emotional range, but the dancing is sassy and bold, the costumes are shiny and red, and the piece is packed with good humor and style. You can go home happy.

This program is repeated on Saturday, July 4. See our [calendar](#) for details.