

Guest Column:

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Opposites attract many fans



BY ALAN TEASLEY

When I was a child and a teenager Durham seemed to shut down in the summer. The schools and universities closed, and there wasn't much to do but to hope the blockbuster movies would distract you for a couple of cool hours a week.

That is certainly not the case now. On July 4, I joined thousands of other folks in the cultural mash-up that now seems so typical of Durham: ballet and baseball. After attending the American Dance Festival performance by the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in the gleaming new Durham Performing Arts Center, we walked down the sidewalk toward the Durham Bulls Athletic Park for the fireworks. To our surprise the stadium was overflowing, which means that more than 10,000 people had come out for the combination of a Team USA baseball game and free fireworks. We sat on the lawn in the park between the DAP and DPAC. The fireworks were dandy, but no more so than the pyrotechnics we had seen onstage a few minutes earlier.

In 1978, the American Dance Festival moved to Durham and changed our cultural landscape once and for all. For six weeks each summer, director Charles Reinhart and his staff have brought the acknowledged giants of modern dance (Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais, Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp) along with cutting

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edge choreographers, such as the amazing collaborative team called Pilobolus -- once the new kids on the choreographic block and now giants themselves.

I confess I didn't know much about modern dance in 1978, but Reinhart did, and he set about educating us. I sampled several performances the first year and became a season subscriber the next. During my time in graduate school during the 1980s, I couldn't afford tickets, so I volunteered as an usher -- nearly every night -- and I really advanced my dance knowledge.

So far this year, I have watched in amazement as the Aspen


Santa Fe Ballet brought us the diverse work of four choreographers (Tharp, Laura Dean, William Forsythe and Jorma Elo). I had never seen the work of Forsythe or Elo, but the talented company made me hungry for more. A couple of weeks later, the Paul Taylor Dance Company demonstrated the full range of Taylor's genius, including his most recent work, the elegiac "Beloved Renegade."

I consider Taylor and the Mark Morris Dance Group (yet to come) to be my sure things -- they never fail to move and inspire me -- but the real fun of ADF is to take a chance on something I haven't seen before. As a fan of the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, I was eager to see Doug Elkins and Friends perform "Fraülein Maria," Elkins's adaptation of "The Sound of Music." Elkins provided an insanely entertaining hour of dance, both an affectionate tribute and a radical re-visioning of the source material. "The Lonely Goatherd" featured amazing hip-hop moves that I have no vocabulary to describe. Did he really flip in the air and land on one hand?

The highlight for me was when Elkins himself performed "Climb Ev'ry Mountain." I know you can all sing the song, so now imagine it accompanying a solo dance: a bearded man in a hooded sweatshirt and sneakers, alone in a spotlight, twitching and popping and stretching and twirling and shooting phantom basketballs, urging us to follow every byway 'til we've found our dreams.

Clearly he has, and I'm glad I was there to witness it.

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