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Inventive Moves to Haydn, Texas Playboys ...

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A REVIEW

The Mark Morris Dance Group's American Dance Festival program offers a feast of movement and music. By now, most know how much music means to Mark Morris. He studies it until he knows it inside and out. In his dances, the music becomes as much an element as the very air through which dancers move.

Sometimes, he even re-arranges the music to suit his purposes – something pianist Colin Fowler pointed out at the post-performance discussion on Thursday. For his "Excursions" (2008), to Samuel Barber's "Excursions for the Piano, Op.20", Morris reverses the order of the four parts so that Barber's treatment of three different idioms of American music, including the blues, come first, followed by the part that combines all three.

This program illustrates the broad range of the music that inspires Morris – from Barber and Haydn to Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky and even including Bob Willis and His Texas Playboys.

That Fowler plays three of the five scores live really adds to the enjoyment of this program. He must take yoga for, in addition to having flexible fingers, he can even sit on a low bench, knees on the stage, as he sits at a toy grand piano and plays French composer Erik Satie's "Menus propos enfantins" ("Childish Small Talk"); "Enfantillages pittoresques" ("A Child's Quaint Ways"); and "Peccadilles importunes" ("Tiresome Pranks") from the 1913 "Nine Children's Pieces." Morris uses this music for his 2000 "Peccadillos," a solo performed by Joe Bowie.

To the tinkling sounds of the toy piano, Bowie embodies this playful, buoyant dance with childlike humor as when he holds his hands like rabbit paws, slaps himself and holds upturned palms in a "so-what?" gesture. He also turns his body into a percussive instrument to "play" along with the piano when he claps his hands, stamps his feet and slaps his thighs.

Although Morris' work often resembles ballet, a closer look reveals some very modern, idiosyncratic moves such as the "leap-frog" look of a repeated sequence in the 1991 "The Lake" in which two dancers lift a partner over a crouched dancer. Then, there's the part where dancers resemble frogs as they bent their knees and turn their legs out to each side and hop on one leg, then the other.

In 2005 "Candleflowerdance" (2005), a modern dance approach dominates. As Collins plays Stravinsky's "Serenade in A," dancers lean their heads as though listening and move their arms like windmills in intermittent wind. In a most creative use of the large square in which most of the dance is performed, the group of dancers lean their heads way back then follow with their bodies and flow together to one corner where they stream to the floor. They repeat this sequence several times – much to my delight – and, no doubt, other dancergoers.

The rollicking "Going Away Party" (1990) rounds out the program with square dance moves, Morris-style, to a medley of tunes by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. These songs embrace yearnings that come across as humorous in "Baby, That Sure Would Go Good," and poignant as in "Goin' Away Party." This party isn't for someone who is going away. But, as the lyrics explain, it's a "going away party for a dream of mine." In the dance, the "dreamer," collapses and other dancers circle around him as though he is invisible. In some eccentric moves, dancers do a toe-heel glide; a trio performs head-rolls; and a man appears to effortlessly lift his partner by clasping her hand as she holds her arm straight up while she's on her back on the floor. (Actually, and this is even more amazing, she creates this illusion by arching her back and propelling herself upwards).

The Mark Morris Dance Group performs this program at 8 p.m. today (Friday) and Saturday at Durham Performing Arts Center. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu



sbroili

Susan Broili has covered the American Dance Festival for 29 years for The Herald-Sun and also writes about the festival for Dance Magazine. She now freelances and lives in Durham where she's trying to choreograph the behavior of the four cats she inherited.

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Posted: 07/24/2009 @ 6:21 pm

ADF students shine in PAST/FORWARD program

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A REVIEW

The American Dance Festival's PAST/FORWARD program ranges from extremely bad human behavior to the sublime – with a surreal dream world in between. Kudos to all the ADF dancers, who appear in these three works.

Faye Driscoll's world premiere, "There is so much mad in me," spotlights human excesses in sex and violence. The effect is depressing, overwhelming and sometimes repulsive as in the orgy in which men and women, in twos and threes, couple in a most graphic manner, albeit with their clothes on. Dancers push, shove and make gun-pointing motions at each other's heads. A crazed crowd attacks a man and keeps kicking him when he's down. In a way that brings to mind the irrational rage that fuels wars, a man incites wrestlers to go after each other.

The opening scene, which parodies TV evangelists and shows that seek to solve people's problems, deteriorates into a shoving match that segues into other scenarios. The opener also showcases the considerable stage presence of Nigerian-born Adaku "Dookie" Utah as she MCs the "Dookie Show."

The last sequence in which paired dancers run at a steady pace along the perimeters of the stage comes as a relief at first after all the chaos including the group's blood-thirsty pursuit of a man they had just beaten. But soon the relentless drumming of footfalls takes on a military connotation. The runners also connote mindlessly following a group to the detriment of others. They show no interest in or impulse to help a lone dancer, whose weak, fragmented movements signal a broken body and spirit.

Laura Dean's 1990 "Infinity" infinitely engages in a way that bypasses the mind and takes a kinetic path to the sublime. As dancers perform intricate patterns of repetitive movements that include spinning, there's an electric feeling of kinetic connection. That switch is triggered big-time when dancers break out of other patterns and suddenly begin to spin. Like some spiritual practices such as the Sufi whirling dervishes, the spinning encourages a meditative state of ecstatic joy.

At one point, dancers form two lines facing each other and a woman from each line peels off and enters the middle and the two begin spinning. The sight of their white, scalloped skirts whirling in spotlights is quite beautiful and riveting.

As if this weren't enough, three musicians, Jason Cirker, Mitchell Cirker and Matthew Spataro, on drums and keyboard, perform Dean's rhythmic score live onstage. Two musicians – Jason Cirker and Spataro – performed with Dean's company.

It's no wonder the entire audience jumped to their feet on Monday to give this performance a rousing ovation. Thank you, Laura Dean and Rodger Belman, who reconstructed the dance, and every one of the 10 ADF dancers, who perform this technically challenging work.

Rosie Herrera's "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret" is a dream of a dance. The dreams that inspire it give this work a surreal quality and, in one case a disturbing, nightmarish one when three men lift a short child-like woman and hold her aloft and repeatedly lower her on 10 cakes atop bar stools. This ultimately comes across as a gang rape as the woman becomes increasingly distraught.

The fragmented scenes in this dance are connected by water images that begin when a man (Evan Hoffman) uses a hose to repeatedly douse his date (Ashley Taylor). Hit full-force with water in the face, she gasps for breath as though drowning.

Gerard "Geraldine" Pilati, with frizzy, long blond hair and wearing a floor-length, silver-sequined gown, delivers quite a performance of "My Heart Will Go On," from "Titanic." Perched on the top rung of a ladder, this Miami-based dancer reprises his role in Herrera's premiere of the dance earlier this year. Geraldine's lip-syncing of the song is both emotionally moving and funny as when "she" flings a locket onstage and then a big chunk of ice as two dancers direct fans towards her to simulate the wind-blown effect of standing at the bow of the fated ocean liner.

A compelling bathtub scene at the end of the dance evokes both a death, perhaps from drowning, and the use of water in a ritual way to anoint and prepare the body after death. The woman (Hsian-Yu Tao) dips a cloth in the tub and lovingly washes a man (Pilati) as the other dancers, seated around the tub, bear witness.

Then, the stage becomes dark, and water images appear on a large screen in a video that shows people in a raft, who fall backwards into the water. In underwater scenes, some swim while others appear lifeless. That the choreographer's father came from Cuba in a raft to Florida 37 years ago has to figure into this video as well as the entire dance.

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Herrera's access to her intuitive self, to dreams, to family history, greatly enriches this work. She also brings varied performance experience that includes hip-hop in music videos and choreographing for drag shows as well as opera where she has also sung. Here's hoping ADF brings her back.

There's one more chance to see this show at 8 p.m. today (Wednesday) in Reynolds Industries Theater at Duke University. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu

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[Category: Arts & Features](#)

Posted: 07/22/2009 @ 5:35 pm

"Renegade" Does It Again

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A REVIEW

Paul Taylor Dance Company's American Dance Festival program presents a Taylor sampler that includes a marzipan of a dance, all sweetness and light, as well as a rich, dark one and a bittersweet dance inspired by Walt Whitman's poems.

The 1982 "Mercuric Tidings" begins slow but soon launches into mercuric gear to allegro sections from two of Schubert's symphonies. It's all about fast, beautiful, exuberant movement for movement's sake as dancers execute big leaps, quick turns and wide-striding runs. And, of course there are some Taylor quirks such as when dancers hold partners upside down and the odd-looking way a dancer trails one foot along the floor as he bents the other knee and crouches.

As for the rarely seen 1963 "Scudorama," when a dance begins under a sky dotted with numerous black clouds and everyone's lifeless on their backs, you know it's not going to be one of Taylor's beautiful dances. It's as though we're seeing Dante's limbo section of his seven rings of hell as the "nearly soulless" spend most of the time dragging themselves along on their stomachs or scuttling on their sides by moving their hands and legs. Sometimes, they do this under Alex Katz-designed shrouds in bold, colorful patterns that resemble beach towels. But in this dance, life's anything but a beach. Although dressed in sunny yellow unitards, two dancers hunch over, arms pumping in a workman-like way as they lumber towards the wings. Dancers, piled on top of each other, turn into a writhing heap.

Three figures in black with a white collar and white cuffs on arms and feet resemble nuns or Quakers but act like neither especially when each uses one hand like a knife to stab a dancer who is down.

A dancer in red resembles Shiva, the Hindu god, who danced the world into existence but who could also destroy life. The latter comes to mind when a seemingly headless figure makes its way across the stage behind her as she dances. In an eerily oddball move, this dancer repeatedly turns low to the stage, then spreads his legs wide like calipers as he plants his shoulders on the stage, his head hidden from view.

In other quirky moves, a woman sits on her partner's shoulders, wraps one leg around his neck and leans her torso so far forward it's a wonder she doesn't choke him. And, a dancer on the floor, positions her body like a low table, back straight and a man picks her up and moves her like furniture. The dance ends as dancers, under shrouds, draw together and assume various shapes to create an abstract landscape that looks quite pleasing. Does this mean they've found their souls at last?

A sense of loss pervades the ADF debut of the 2009 "Beloved Renegade." This mood seems fitting for a work commissioned in memory of a husband and father. This beautiful elegiac work, set to Francis Poulenc's "Gloria" and inspired by lines from Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," celebrates life even as it acknowledges death. In fact, the brief sections that celebrate – "I sing the body electric –" and "Come children, come my boys and girls" – serve to also emphasize the ephemeral nature of life. Seeing dancers, as children, play hand games and frolic, brings to mind how quickly, in the blink of an eye, it seems, that youth becomes old age. Another scene that works the same way occurs when a woman tenderly touches her partner, even lightly on his crotch – a young love that will also fall away over time.

Mostly, the Whitman lines and dance center on death with war images such as when a dancer clutches his stomach and doubles over as though wounded. The use of a scrim makes for some haunting images and also connotes the boundaries between life and death as when fallen dancers behind the scrim disappear.

Other scenes denote a requiem-like reverence for the dead such as the way five dancers carry another high above their heads. A dancer embodies grief as she stands, rocks back and forth and beats her fists on her thighs. Of course, there are some quirks such as when couples turn their bodies into wheels as they hold onto each other's legs and roll.

There's also a theme of creation as far as poets and dancemakers. Michael Trusnovic, in a white suit, portrays the poet/dancemaker, who comforts the wounded, expresses tender love in the way he dances with a woman, and when it's time for him to go, he kisses and hugs his friends, then assumes a still repose on the stage floor. Sometimes, he sits and watches humankind (portrayed by dancers) in the ever-observant way of poets (and choreographers) in order to draw from life to create their art.

The title could also refer to Taylor, his penchant for doing things his way such as when he did not use contemporary music but chose instead to use classic work including Bach. Once, when someone asked him why, he replied: "Bach is new to me." Like Whitman, Taylor's work encompasses a broad spectrum of human nature and experience. There's love, hate, death, loss, joy, peace, war, ugly and beautiful. There's also the basic duality of humans that causes them to act like animals as well as civilized beings. And, like the poet, Taylor has created – and continues to do so – a body of work that will last.

The Paul Taylor Dance Company gives the last ADF performance of this program at 8 p.m. today at the Durham Performing Arts Center. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu

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Category: [Arts & Features](#)

Posted: 07/18/2009 @ 11:55 am

Something Good

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A REVIEW

Suddenly, I felt lighter, more expansive last night as I drove home through the unseasonably cool air and even stuck one arm out the window as I cruised along in my cherry red Honda Civic. That's what Doug Elkins' "Fraulein Maria" did for me.

Elkins had us even before the curtain rose on the American Dance Festival performance of his 70-minute take on "Sound of Music." That's because Master of Ceremonies Michael Preston (who also co-directs with Barbara Karger), leads the audience in "Do-Re-Mi." After coaching three theater sections to sing our one-note parts, he turns us loose to sing the entire song and everyone belts it out word-for-word. The collective mood of the audience seems to lift considerably due to the power of singing out loud in a group and also because "The Sound of Music" is so much a part of our psyche and hearts. So, Elkins has that going for him, too.

He also draws on his considerable sense of humor, imagination, inventiveness and ability to seamlessly integrate a variety of dance styles that included hip-hop, break dance, kathak, tap, ballet – and, of course, modern dance. It's been a long time – if ever – that I have laughed this much at a dance performance. Elkins' humor stems from the unexpected, inventive and sometimes downright bawdy and bodacious takes on the Rodgers and Hammerstein score.

Inventiveness begins at the very beginning – a very good place to start – as Preston, with dancers' help, create an Austrian Alps landscape. He throws out a panel of bright green fabric that dancers spread out for grass. Other dancers, hunch under light gray or dark gray fabric to form the peaks. Preston and dancers add small, glittering silver and green fir trees. To top things off, Preston wraps a piece of white fabric around one peak for a snow-covered effect. Thanks to all this creative effort, the hills do come alive.

Then, there's his use of three Marias instead of one – and a male Maria, to boot. All these dancers – Meghan Merrill, Donnell Oakley (from Raleigh) and John Sorensen-Jolink embrace the role. Merrill winds up getting von Trapp (Scott Lowe) and after all the hilarity, their romantic duet to "Something Good" communicates a tender caring and pure, lyrical beauty.

Instead of boy and girl in the "Sixteen Going on Seventeen" number, Elkins has Devin Buchanan, in his professional debut, play Liesl, who is pursued by the acrobatic Gui Greene as Rolf. In one section, they use their hands to

express how together they've become one person. With one dancer behind the other, they each use a hand so it looks like both hands belong to one person. (There must be a history of this – in vaudeville, perhaps. It's funny, but also touching.) And, the erotic use of a retractable tape measurer supplies the raunchiest move of the dance.

As Mother Abbess in "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," Elkins combines cool and machismo moves as he rolls with continuous hip-hop, break dance and club dance moves and some understated gestures as he stays in one spotlight.

In this work as a whole, Elkins pays tribute to such modern dance icons as Trisha Brown and Paul Taylor. He takes to the max and beyond Brown's use of a movement phrase that accumulates in a ripple effect as it moves from one dancer to the next. At one point, dancers form a double row of linked, crooked elbows with a wave motion that moves two different ways.

Dancers take well-deserved bows to "So Long, Farewell" and a roar of approval from an audience on its feet. There's more to say – but it's time to go – to see this dance.

Doug Elkins and Friends perform "Fraulein Maria" at 8 p.m. today and Wednesday at Reynolds Industries Theater. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu.

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Posted: 07/14/2009 @ 6:54 pm

Something Old, Something New

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A REVIEW

Chairs, black balloons, body sculptures, jocular jocks and muscle-driven engines figure into the Pilobolus program of old and new works at the troupe's 37th appearance at the American Dance Festival.

This program includes a dance from the troupe's very first year – the 1971 "Walkyndon" that pokes fun at jocks in a good-spirited way and never fails to keep 'em laughing – even in Moscow's Pushkin Theatre when the troupe performed it at ADF's first Russian Festival in 1992. Slapstick rules and so does a fierce competitive nature that shows its fangs in a funny way when dancers use their teeth to latch onto the sports shorts of the athlete in front of them. That the dance remains fresh after all these years speaks to a keen understanding of human nature, the ability to laugh at oneself and a talent for physical comedy.

Another vintage dance, the 1972 "Ocellus," displays the unique approach to dance the troupe came up with early on. How can just four men create so many sculptural shapes that don't seem human at all? It's sometimes hard to figure out how they do it – even when they move slowly as though underwater as they did in this piece. Even when you can see how they do it, it looks pleasingly strange as when pairs of standing dancers link up with one upside down. Sometimes, their shifting shapes look like a kaleidoscope. Because the movements are slow and sustained, this dance makes you aware of the tensile strength and suppleness that enables them to contort, balance and support each other's weight.

The ADF debut of Jonathan Wolken's "Redline," created as are all dances in collaboration with company members, also underlines the athleticism and strength of this troupe. Hunched over, dancers look burly as strong men with the wide stance needed to lift weights. Only, these dancers stomp, catapult each other through the air, roll across the stage and flip forwards and backwards. They windmill their arms as though preparing for take-off. In a gravity-defying feat, a dancer even throws himself into space and rolls quickly like a log in mid-air. Then, he falls prostrate in a spotlight but within seconds, when he hears a "bong," he rises up as though to start again. And, that's how this dance ends.

The program also features two collaborations between Pilobolus and Israeli choreographers Avshalom Pollak and Inbal Pinto: the 2007 "Rushes" and the world premiere, "2b." Judging from what they come up with, it's a rich collaboration indeed.

The Israelis add a different kind of strangeness that's full of whimsy and deeply human. Although the dances defy any logical explanation, there's still a feeling that you're in good hands even when one character has the head of a fish as in "2b". This dance begins with a character in black hat and topcoat, who holds onto a suspended trapeze bar and is surrounded by a ring of 25 black balloons that look like big bubbles. He dunks himself headfirst beneath the ring to the sound of gurgling water.

Next, we hear Elvis Presley singing the humorous calypso song, "Ito Eats," from the film, "Blue Hawaii." See what I mean about whimsy. The sound

score also includes Tom Waits and J.S. Bach. Besides the fish and balloon man, there's a woman and an acrobatic man in red who balances in various ways on the sill of a very short red door. All seem to be alone, even though they share a stage. The woman tries to interact with the balloon man, but every time she reaches for a balloon, he pops it. Talk about rejection. She does manage to grab the last balloon and walks off on her toes, but after she goes through the red door, we hear the balloon pop.

The four characters do dance together later but the partnering seems awkward. They also use each other as stepping stones. The dance ends as everyone exits through the small door except the fish. He grasps the trapeze bar and, suspended, holds his legs straight, his feet oddly resembling flippers, as a single balloon drifts to the floor.

"Rushes" looks even better than two years ago if that's possible. The lighting looks dimmer, more atmospheric. Did they use the sounds of water, a mosquito and a bleating goat last time? The sound of a train's clanging bell is still part of the dance. And, the imaginative use of chairs delights and proves awe-inspiring. In a circle, dancers move chairs up and down like calliope animals as they move 'round and 'round. The audience lets out a collective sound of awe when dancers, with lightning speed, shove chairs from one end of a line to the other in order to form a continuous "road" so a man can keep walking as he carries a woman on his back. Another chair scene seems to both quote and trump the man entangled in a chair in the solo from "The Empty Suitor," a vintage Pilobolus dance. In "Rushes," at first there's no sign of a man at all, just a heap of chairs. Then, one chair moves, and another. The man stands but chairs cover him, hooked around his neck, arms, and legs. He looks like a porcupine as he clumps along.

Pilobolus performs the last ADF performance of this program at 8 p.m. tonight at the Durham Performing Arts Center. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu



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Category: [Arts & Features](#)

Posted: 07/11/2009 @ 5:23 pm

ADF "Crew" Does It Again

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A REVIEW

The ADF Faculty Concert has always been a highlight for students and usually for other audience members as well. Monday night's version was no exception. The 10 dances, showcasing work by teachers, students and even the production crew, provided both heartfelt and raucous moments. And, a few surprises.

In one surprise, AnJanee Bell, daughter of Durham Mayor Bill Bell, appears in a duet, "Inner Current," with former Pilobolus dancer Gaspard Louis, who choreographed the dance. Louis draws from his Pilobolus experience in terms of body connections and lifts. As in Pilobolus, the women – in this case Bell – do their share of lifting. In the last lift, Bell holds Louis, like a log, to her side, his legs together and straight. This and other lifts by both dancers have a tender quality, as does the entire dance. Louis incorporates some beautiful, innovation moves such as when he revolves, like a clock hand, around her as her body turns on the floor. He holds her by the waist, her legs clasped behind his legs, and she extends her body, undulates into space as her arms float. (The Mayor and his wife were in the audience and must have been proud of their daughter's performance and the enthusiastic audience response to the duet.)

In what has become known for the surprising, hilarious take on other companies' performances at ADF, the production crew (comprised mainly of ADF students), does it again in "Techadance." This year, the crew manages to combine a tribute to the late pop mega star Michael Jackson, with a spoof of ADF performances this season. So, when the cast dons black suits and hats, sit in a semi-circle of chairs, and performs the "wave" motion in which they rear back, one-by-one – a move from Ohad Naharin's "Decadance" (2007) - they perform this to Jackson's "Beat It." And, later they perform to the pop star's "Thriller" and even do some moon-walking. In these "crew dances," it's fun to try to name the companies they are spoofing. This time, they seem to have the most fun with work by Shen Wei and H.Art Chaos. So what if they didn't have a bathtub for the hair-dipping and hurricane-force, water-flinging seen in Sakiko Oshima's "Rite of Spring" in the H.Art Chaos program. A mop bucket full of water in which a dancer dips her head and flings a few drops will do. They also include the walking-on-knees move from Emanuel Gat's "Winter Variations."

The last big surprise of the evening won't be revealed here so as not to spoil it.

The concert also features Gerri Houlihan's "Aria #2 From Of Love," created for and dedicated to the late Gerald E. Myers. Husband of long-time ADF dean Martha Myers, he spent many years as ADF philosopher in residence

and helped spearhead the Black Traditions in Modern Dance Project as well as the Talking About Dance panel discussions. He also had a passion for and curiosity about modern dance. In this dance tribute to him, Heather Benson's arm gestures communicate an imploring, caring, pensive mood. But her last gesture best communicates what it's like to lose someone as she starts to walk off, then looks back as though hoping to see the one she has lost.

Shani Nwando Ikerioha Collins delivers a powerful tribute to the power of women not only to endure but also to triumph in her "...But Some of Us Are Brave." Her shaking hands and serpentine arms and rolling shoulders help communicate deep-seated emotions and determination to overcome being overlooked.

Ellen Hemphill doesn't dance at all but does produce some spine-chilling and poignant moments in her vocal renditions of Leonard Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat" and "Cry Me a River." Her voice seems to come from places centuries deep within the human soul.

For the first time ever, the ADF offers a second performance of the Faculty Concert at 8 p.m. today (July 7) at Reynolds Industries Theater. For tickets, call 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu



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Posted: 07/07/2009 @ 2:48 pm
