

Masthead

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ADF takes a leap

DURHAM -- Human marionettes manipulated by robotic clowns. Women suspended on wires doing cartwheels. Ten pink birthday cakes lined up as a dangled body's destination.

Can these highly theatrical activities be called "dance"? That's the question this year's American Dance Festival will be asking when these images appear this season.

Dance on stage is theatrical by definition, and modern dance is usually quite theatrical in its lighting, costuming and physical interactions. So it might seem odd that the theme for this year's festival asks "What is Dance Theater?"

But the question arises because of a trend: Modern dance companies are incorporating an increasing number of elements from the theater, including elaborate sets and props, technically sophisticated special effects, and even singing and spoken dialogue. Many modern-dance choreographers are working on Broadway and in other theatrical arenas, bringing that experience back to their companies and applying it to new works.

This summer's lineup is geared to demonstrate the range of "dance theater," in world premieres as well as established works. Some companies will be new to the festival, such as RUBBERBANDance and the Kate Weare Company, while others, from Paul Taylor to Shen Wei, will be familiar favorites.

All will put their most theatrical pieces on display, so this may be the best time to get hooked on modern dance. And it's an especially good year for children, with three children's Saturday matinees, as well as free children's events.

With 6 1/2 weeks of dance programs, including eight new ADF commissions, a U.S. premiere, two reconstructions and five ADF debuts - where to start? Here are some recommended performances on this year's schedule:

Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company

June 17-19

"Oyster" is the company's masterwork, a fantastical world of circus sideshow denizens. Audiences will recognize the Tim Burton influences (it's based on one of the filmmaker's short stories) in the oddball creatures and nightmarish activities in this eye-popping presentation.

Dendy Dancetheater

June 21-23

North Carolina native Mark Dendy offers the premiere of a commissioned work that explores his life

as a Southerner moving to New York to become a dancer. Responsible for last season's highly creative site-specific works, Dendy's dance and theater background should make this another fascinating piece.

Pilobolus

July 1-3

The ever-popular group offers two commissioned premieres, one in conjunction with Pulitzer Prize-winning comic strip illustrator and children's author Art Spiegelman, the other with former rock star and now family-friendly composer-performer Dan Zanes.

Martha Clarke

July 5-7

A founding member of Pilobolus, Clarke has gone on to choreograph many of her own works, as well as direct plays and operas. This year she collaborates with Academy Award-winning writer Alfred Uhry ("Driving Miss Daisy") on a piece inspired by the Shaker movement that explores the contradiction between Shaker prudery and suppressed desire.

Brenda Angiel Aerial Dance Company

July 8-10

The Argentine company's name says it all - a magical exploration of wired flight and movement. It's staging the U.S. premiere of "8cho," a whirl of tangos, milongas and waltzes, accompanied by a live band and vocalists.

Rosie Herrera

July 12-14

This Miami-based company was a hit last summer with Herrera's hilarious and poignant "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret," which combines dance, theater, cabaret and film. It's back this year, along with a newly commissioned piece.