Choreographing in the Classic Jazz Tradition

By Billy Siegenfeld

Swing—that essential ingredient of all classic jazz performance—uses the language of syncopation and surprise.

I choreograph dances that are inspired by what might be called the classic tradition of jazz dancing. That is, I put together movement that aims for a fresh mix of the rhythmic punch and unashamed fun found in the movie musicals, especially those featuring the sophisticated rhythm work of Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, and the early Bob Fosse, among others.

A number of characteristics show up in this dancing: hair-trigger sensitivity to musical rhythm; vigorous, hard-hitting energy attack; a low center of gravity that creates a base for sleek, rapid locomotion; sudden stop-actions that throw the body into harsh angles; and a performing persona that can by turns...
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communicate wit, self-mockery, ardor, gangster toughness and a warm, easy graciousness.

Working out of this tradition, I have discovered that it is Astaire who serves as the richest source for wonderment and repeated study. He is the model for transforming the entire body into a jazz instrument. He seemed to understand that dance rhythm has a better chance of impacting the viewer when expressed through several body parts at once, not just the feet. In film after film he uses a battery of hands, arms, head, as well as feet, to amplify the percussive effect of a jazz riff. Indeed, like a drummer, he plays these gestures against the space, as if the air were stacked with drumheads and his chief concern were to zing them with sharpshooter precision. Fayard Nicholas was also a magician at playing his body this way, as were several other unsung dance masters of jazz time.

Because of his own musicianly grasp of jazz (he could knock off bop-like accompaniments on both drums and piano), Astaire was arguably the most effective at physicalizing swing. Swing is the rhythmic essence of classic jazz performance. It has to do with the way downbeats and those falling between them—called syncopations—are constantly fighting each other for dominance. But it's only a mock-fight. In the most thrilling performances of the music and dance, neither "side" wins—neither the downbeats with their steady-on regularity, nor the offbeats with their unpredictability. This may explain the atmosphere of funhouse tension felt at jazz events. The performance is a continuing alternation between grooves that pull the audience and bursts of syncopation that cause their blood to jump (jazz's version of going "boo!"). To keep audiences suspended in this cycle of surprise and temporary relief, performers dart back and forth between both sides of the rhythmic tug-of-war. As applied to dance, this involves a skill for spinning out movements that land on the beat and at the next moment charging in to nail them off it.

So if this style of choreography is about anything, it is about the way movement can be shaped to heat up the play between the downbeat and its opposite, the syncopated beat. "Play" is the keyword here. For dancers, the idea is to become joyous spokespeople for both sides of the swing contract—and to become more confident in their expression of the twin qualities of ease and wild surprise that inhabit all swinging jazz. ★

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