

# DANCE FEVER



Steve Labuzetta

For seven consecutive weekends in June and July, the world's leading modern dance companies come to Duke University to bedazzle. The Garth Fagan Dance will open this year's festival on June 7.



Lois Greenfield

Heralded by *Newsweek* magazine as our "greatest living choreographer," the Paul Taylor Dance Company keeps ADF audiences coming back year after year.

Durham's acclaimed **American Dance Festival** is more than seven weeks of performances each summer. It's a "great cultural conversation" that extends the artistic process to the global stage – and some nontraditional settings.

BY MIRIAM SAULS

## Modern dance blossomed in the 1930s

when rebels Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman flung off their ballet shoes in favor of bare feet and began to experiment, train students, and create. Their work evolved into the American Dance Festival, and Durham has been the center of the modern dance universe since 1978, when the festival moved to Duke University after decades in New England.

Raymond Yazbeck



The Merce Cunningham Dance Company performed at the Baalbeck Festival Event last July. Cunningham, "one of the few true revolutionaries in the history of dance," according to *The New York Times Magazine*, brings his dancers to Durham in July.

Howard Schatz



## 2000 & 2001 Performances

Pilobolus Dance Theatre is known for its outrageously original dance and has become an ADF favorite.



Clive Barnes of *The New York Post* has proclaimed the ADF “the world’s greatest dance festival.” For seven consecutive weekends in June and July, the world’s leading modern dance companies come to Page Auditorium on Duke’s West Campus to bewitch and bedazzle. Weeknights, Reynolds Theater provides a stage for new and emerging groups.

The experience of an ADF performance begins even before you settle into your seat and the house lights dim. Standing outside Page in the shadow of the gothic Duke Chapel spire as the sun sets is rare entertainment in itself. Here you mingle with a sophisticated crowd of dance lovers and a sea of sleek, graceful, tattooed, pierced, scantily clad, young dancers, aglow and eager to soak up the best the world has to offer in their field of passion.

These delightful summer evenings, however, are only part of what makes up ADF. Its mission is not only to present dance and train dancers, but also to build wider audiences, enhance public understanding, preserve the history of modern dance, and especially to support new work.

Stephanie and Charles Reinhart, co-directors of the ADF, are adept at finding opportunities and funding to make the commissioning of new work possible. Last year alone, 17 new dances were commissioned for the festival, enriching

the repertory of both emerging and seasoned troupes, and therefore the overall body of modern dance works. Supporters such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation have recognized the importance of modern dance as an indigenous American art form and have made some significant commissions possible.

A recent initiative, the Doris Duke Millennium Awards for Modern Dance and Jazz Music Collaborations, celebrated the kinship of modern dance and jazz. A three-year program, begun in 1997 in partnership with the Kennedy Center in Washington, supported six choreographers and jazz composers who worked together to create six dance pieces set to live jazz. The collaboration made for an exciting evening for audiences at those Durham debuts.

### RISKY BUSINESS

Even so, such pioneering works can be risky. A choreographer’s new and exciting vision may not please everyone and it may not fill the house. “People walked out on Merce Cunningham in the beginning,” notes Stephanie Reinhart. Cunningham, a protégé of Martha Graham, formed his dance company in North Carolina (at Black Mountain



Manu Theobald

A scene from "Magic Frequencies" in which Meredith Monk/The House combine dance and theater to create a performance to remember.

Ron Brown/EVIDENCE will take the stage at ADF this summer with its usual vibrant colors and powerful physical energy.



Rose Fichtenbaum

College near Asheville in 1953) and became one of the leading figures in all of modern dance.

“Some dance is difficult to sell,” she adds. “While it would be nice to present dance that is a sure thing at the box office, we can’t do it at the expense of not creating the work.” Charles Reinhart echoes the sentiment. “Popularity is not our primary concern, but serving the choreographers and helping them make the work.”

In addition to choreographers, ADF also serves more than 450 students at its six-week school held each summer during the festival. Dancers last summer came from 45 states and 22 countries and chose from more than 60 classes offered each day. Seventy younger students, ages 12 to 16, attended a four-week school. Visiting artists, faculty members, and choreographers-in-residence offered master classes to more than 400 participants.

At the same time, ADF is taking dance beyond the campus. Its community crossover program offers new channels for interaction with communities traditionally overlooked by the artistic process, such as retirement homes, mental health centers, and substance abuse clinics. The populations in these places get to participate in the creative process, many for the first time, and students are being trained to take dance into these non-traditional settings so this kind of work can spread into other communities.

The corporate environment is another area of interest. Last year, ADF teamed up with the North Carolina Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Charles E. Culpepper Foundation for a yearlong project involving New York-based David Dorfman Dance. The company took dance into workplaces throughout North Carolina. “These were people who didn’t know they could dance,” says Dorfman. “What else might be possible for them? We can remove barriers and change beliefs through dance.”

To fulfill its mission of preservation and education, ADF is the collector, keeper, and preserver of records and collections pertaining to the history of modern dance, and it publishes and produces materials relating to dance, such as the PBS special “Free to Dance: The African-American Presence in Modern Dance,” which airs this month.

## THE CHINA SYNDROME

The ADF moved onto the global stage in the 1980s as worldwide recognition of modern dance grew. In 1984, it created the International Choreographers Residency Program, through which more than 300 choreographers from around the world have studied and choreographed at ADF. The festival has begun a commissioning program for especially talented international choreographers as well. Mini-ADFs were instituted in the 1980s and 1990s, offering classes, workshops, and performances in Japan, Korea, India, and Russia.

In 1987, ADF teachers began the first modern dance program in China, a country where self-expression has not been especially encouraged by the government. Even so, government officials stood proudly beside ADF faculty in 1990 to watch the graduation of the first class, which went on to form the country’s first professional modern dance group, the Guangdong Modern Dance Company. The group made its U.S. debut at ADF in 1991.

ADF has also developed specially designed collaborative projects with dance institutions in countries all over the globe — from South America to Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Far East. Because modern dance epitomizes the individual’s right to freedom of expression, a metaphor for the democratic ideal, it’s possible to infer that ADF has become an extraordinary ambassador for the American way of life.

“ADF’s support of global cross-pollination of dance styles and cultures has been one of its most exciting

## to know more

For more information about ADF, call (919) 684-6402 or visit its website at [www.americandancefestival.org](http://www.americandancefestival.org). “Free to Dance” will air at 8 p.m. on Sunday, June 24, on PBS’s *Great Performances: Dance in America*. Produced by ADF, “Free to Dance” chronicles the crucial role African-American dancers and choreographers have played in the development of modern dance as an American art form. Set against the cultural, social, and economic backdrop of American life from 1900, it is also a remarkable tale of the against-the-odds struggle by African-American dancers and choreographers for recognition and acceptance as highly talented and passionate performers. (Please check your local PBS station’s listings for dates and times in your area.)

## modern dance

achievements,” says Carlton Midyette, chair of the ADF Board of Directors. “We have seen phenomenal growth of modern dance both here and abroad.”

### THE HOME AND THE WORLD

With growth, however, comes growing pains. ADF has outgrown its quarters at Duke. The very companies ADF has supported and nurtured are creating bigger and better works, and the stage at Page Auditorium is not large enough to hold some of the new pieces. “Our needs are driven by the success of the art form and the growth and expansion of some of the companies we’ve raised,” says Midyette. “Now we can’t even feature some of their premieres, and we must be able to present them to showcase and support the companies and remain a leader in the field.”

The Duke campus was always intended as a temporary home for the festival. Terry Sanford, the late governor, U.S. senator and Duke president who was instrumental in bringing ADF to Durham, promised a permanent home and set out to see that it would be built. A proposed Sanford Center has been designed with ADF quarters in mind, but its location and funding have not been firmly established. A redevelopment project in downtown Durham could possibly also include a home for the festival.

“We would like to stay in Durham. Durham has been wonderful,” says Midyette. “Ideally we would like to be part of an urban street scene with restaurants, offices, shops, and the energetic, populated atmosphere that the word ‘festival’ connotes. We are delighted that options are in the works. Mostly we want to be in a place that will capitalize on the great cultural conversation we have already begun and one that will allow us to continue our promotion of modern dance for the next 100 years.”



*Freelance writer Miriam Sauls lives in Raleigh.*

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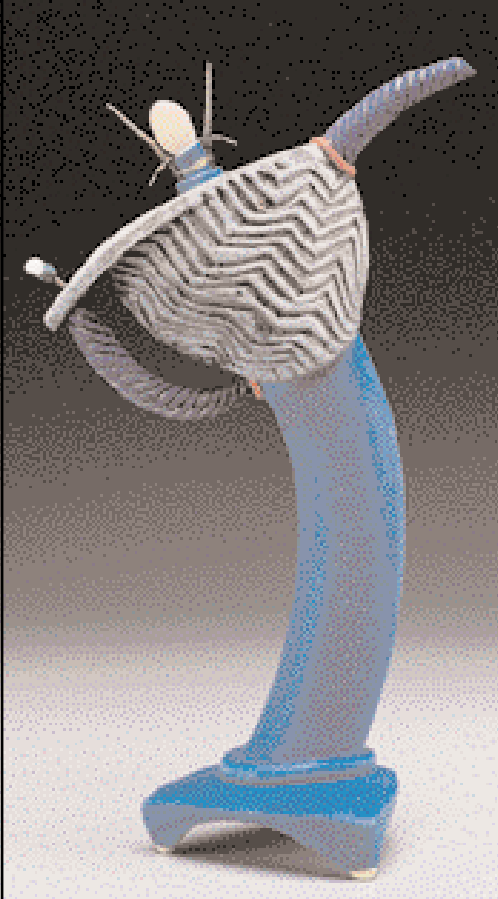
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