

The Berkshire Eagle

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Dance Review

Jazz Parade at the Pillow

By Allison Tracy

WHATEVER is meant by "jazz dance" — and it means many different styles today — what the audience saw last night at the Jacob's Pillow Jazz Parade was music, where choreography epitomizes jazz composition: improvisational, syncopated, contrapuntal. Above all, what these works demonstrated was the tradition of jazz as ensemble play — where the discipline of dance romps like beer and skittles.

This was the final "student" performance on the roster, bringing to a conclusion the jazz project at the Pillow school. It also showed off the choreography of the project's teachers, Lynn Simonson, Keith Terry and Mark Morris. To give the whole concert the clout of "Festival status," a professional tap virtuoso, Fred Strickler, concluded the program.

But what he added, as it turned out, was not the dimension of "professionalism," for the whole concert had pronounced class. Rather, his particular brand of very textural tap served to underscore and define what the other choreography was already giving us: a lesson in the way jazz dance illustrates jazz music.

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Strickler's first "Tone Poem" was a delicate zapateado, like the gypsy flamenco solos that wear down our defenses with rhythms so intricate and tight they sound like beads scattering on a tile floor.

Strickler mostly danced a cappella. When he was joined later by the music of Paul Arslanian, his heel-and-toe pulsations embroidered around the music tempo, adding the depth of layered texture.

Later in "Excursions, Opus 20" by Samuel Barber, a work of sweet dissonances played with a wonderful chamber touch by pianist Althea Waites, he used the treble or bass rhythms exactly, matching them dissonance for dissonance in percussion with a different "color."

It was a nice brand of concertizing where musician and dancer challenge each other's instruments and make demands in the nicest way.

We saw another version of this type of challenge dance in "See Hear Now," choreographed by Simon-

son and Terry, which made a particularly vivid statement that a whole is very much its parts.

It is incredible that in five weeks individuals could have been melded into such an organic unit, where the seamless flow of sound depended utterly on the interdependence of the dancers. Slapping the bodies, stamping and making soft, sibilant voice sounds, the dancers pieced together a wonderful patchwork of movement with the feel of a tribal celebration. It had again that wonderfully complex percussive sound, with sudden level shifts or clusterings that added visual punctuation.

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Not just the convoluted syncopation of jazz, but also its sailing flights of improvisational fancy was captured in the extraordinary Mark Morris work, "Come on Home." Morris is the Bette Midler of choreographers. He uses no "steps." That is, the dancers step around in various ways, but mostly, his movement is body angles, timing emphasis or de-emphasis. The dancers seemed to spill and spew and haul each other around the stage, in and out of the wings.

Always they moved in exquisite contrapuntal forms, and the forms of the dancers looked like "body-scat" — the poses and transitions mimic the energy or moodiness of the musical sound or reflect the imagery of the lyrics.

Every dance Morris makes looks silly and poignant, not because he doesn't take himself seriously, but because that's what the music sounds like. Every work I've seen reminds me of Walt Disney's "Fantasia," a cartoonlike, dreamlike version of life in which no one has any particular sex and no one ever gets hurt. It is lovely stuff. And I was sad when it ended.

Finally, this concert featured the best break dancing yet seen in the Berkshires, the work of David Bowen and his fine poppers and lockers, Jenny Jem, Animal and Meco. It's obvious that Bowen has had formal dance training and that he knows his onions around mime and choreography. He showed us that break dancing has hit the concert stage as very legitimate theater.