

Dancing Another Day

At 83, Paul Taylor could stop creating dances. But, he delights in tackling the emotion, humor, and sheer beauty of the art form. Four of his works are on Dance Celebration's 31st season-opening program.

By Merilyn Jackson
FOR THE INQUIRER

After 60 years as one of America's most beloved dance makers, 83-year-old Paul Taylor could rest on his laurels. But he won't.

Like his late peer Merce Cunningham and onetime mentor Martha Graham, Taylor has carved his own path in the genre and, as they did, continues creating new work well beyond the point at which many artists retire.

In the 1950s and '60s, as others pioneered pure dance, abstract, or conceptual works, Taylor continued to choreograph work that was, and is, delighted to tackle narrative, emotion, humor, and sheer beauty. That's not to say that you'll find every element in each piece; some are abstract, nonnarrative. As Taylor said in a recent interview, "*Fibers*, for instance, has no specific meaning."

A quartet to music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1963's *Fibers* — which Taylor originally danced — is featured on Dance Celebration's 31st season-opening program, presented by Dance Affiliates and the Annenberg Center Thursday

through Saturday. It and the three other works on the program show Taylor's imaginative breadth over a 52-year span, right to the present.

In the past, many of the great dancers of his generation danced with Martha Graham — as he did for seven seasons while continuing to make work for his own company. I wondered how she viewed his work outside her company.

See **TAYLOR** on C3

"Oh, she was supportive. She would come to my performances," he said by phone from his New York home, "and sometimes in the early days she called me Bad Boy."

In similar fashion, his own company spawned such choreographers as Daniel Esralow and David Parsons, also a Dance Celebration favorite who spun off like a satellite, sharing some of Taylor's impishness.

Does he take any interest in their careers?

"Sure — I go to see David's work and Lila York, who danced with me for 12 years, is a choreographer on her own getting a lot of recognition, and many years ago, the German girl." He paused to remember her name — "Oh, Pina [Bausch, the late expressionist dancer/choreographer]! We took classes together at Juilliard and went to Spoleto" to perform.

Some company members — Robert Kleinendorst, Michelle Fleet,

Michael Trusnovec, Parisa Khobdeh — have been with him for 10 to 15 years. How does he keep them so long?

"Oh, it's up to them. They stay with me as long as they want to or can. And," he adds, "it makes them very easy to work with. I can't really demonstrate the phrases anymore, but they can read my mind and they can show the others for me."

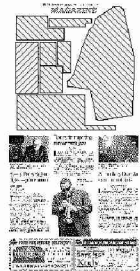
The Annenberg program marks the Philadelphia premiere of *American Dreamer*, first seen at the Vail Dance Festival in Vail, Colo., in August. Six men and six women dance it to a Stephen Foster medley, most of them recordings by baritone Thomas Hampson. New York Times dance critic Alastair Macauley said, "The work's chief fault is that, using only five Foster numbers, it was too short."

Taylor laughs when he hears that quote. "Yes, well, each of the dances relates to the songs, the lyrics. I picked the ones that most fit that method of working," he said. "Another, which isn't sung but just has the music, is 'Camptown Races.' The dancers are in practice clothes rehearsing this piece and the dancers that are not in the section are half in, half out of costume."

Taylor's principal set and costume designer, Santo Loquasto, devised the conceit "of having parts of the costumes off the side of the stage so the dancers seem to randomly pick up a hat or a garment to try dancing in it."

Randy Swartz is the founder and director of Dance Celebration and presents Taylor's company at Annenberg every two or three years. "My relationship with Paul Taylor goes back to 1971 when I presented the company at the Walnut Street Theatre," says Swartz. "Charlie Reinhart, then dance program director of the National Endowment for the Arts, had been Taylor's first manager and he recommended them to me. The earliest work at this concert was *Big Bertha*, dealing with provocative social issues. The company arrived with five dancers in a van driven by Paul."

I bring up *Company B*, a poignant treatise on war, love, and mortality set to jaunty music — one of my Taylor favorites, which the Pennsyl-



vania Ballet performs so movingly.

“Oh yes, a very good one. As a kid I loved the Andrews Sisters and used to play them on the jukebox.” When he began to choreograph the work, he said, he asked for the rights to use the vocal trio’s music. “Fortunately, Maxine gave me the rights and came to the opening-night performance, and once we shared a program.

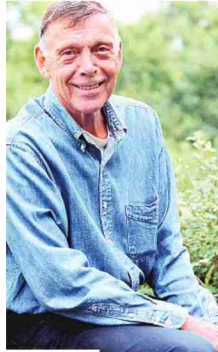
“She had wonderful stories. One was about the time a note was handed to [her sister] Patty that said the war was just over. What I knew about war — oddly — you touch the realities of it through the Andrews Sisters music.”

Taylor is a genius at using the right music for effect, often in hilarious counterpoint to the subject. The program’s madcap 1976 *Gossamer Gallants* is set to music from Bedrich Smetana’s opera *The Bartered Bride*. “It’s about the mating habits of fireflies that at the end do the males in.”

And for 1979’s *Profiles*, the darkest, moodiest piece on the bill, he

commissioned a violent score for strings by Jan Radzynski.

“I don’t know how these things come about. We probably had a happy dance before so I thought — time for something scary,” he mused. “I want to keep going. I like to make dance and work with the company and the music. That’s my life.”



**PAUL
TAYLOR**



**Laura Halzack and
Michael Trusnovec**
in "The Uncommitted."
TOM CARAVAGLIA



Sean Mahoney and Michael Novak in "Gossamer Gallants." TOM CARAVAGLIA



Paul Taylor giving members of his company instructions during a rehearsal at his studio in 2005. Of "Gossamer Gallants," he said, "It's about the mating habits of fireflies that at the end do the males in." MARY ALTAFFER / Associated Press

DANCE

► Paul Taylor Dance Company

7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday
at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St.

Tickets: \$20-\$60

Information: 215-898-3900 or www.annenbergcenter.org



Paul Taylor Dance Company performing "Esplanade." His company spawned such choreographers as Daniel Esralow and David Parsons. PAUL B. GOODE