

## Prepare for short Tharp shocks



Photo Dee Conway

### ***Ismene Brown meets American choreographer Twyla Tharp , who is putting swinging Londoners on stage next week***

TWYLA Tharp made her London dancing debut as a hump crawling under a towel at the Shaftesbury Theatre. Before long she made her choreographic debut in London, and garnered the following review, which she still relishes more than 30 years later: "Three ladies, one of them named Twyla Tharp, performed this evening at the such-and-such theatre, and threaten to do so again tomorrow."

"I have a very special feeling for the British press," she told me in her deliberate Midwest drawl, eyeing me hawkishly.

Tharp has been rhymed with sharp ever since her towel days; she is tiny and tanned, a silver-headed, sinewy little bird; she speaks crisply, thinks snappily, pounces on loose threads, thumps away at serious matters, and then begs for a snip of gossip.

She returns to London next week with her latest group, called *Tharp!* (the exclamation mark, some say, is typical of her). Long ago, in the Sixties, she was a dour young person asserting on black-and-white television that she didn't give a fig for the audience, or even whether they came at all. She even had her dancers perform one piece inside a cardboard box, largely invisible to the public.

Then she dextrously turned her hand to more popular dance-making, from experimental to jazz to classical ballet. To most people Tharp's dances mean pizzazz, zip, a carefree energy and sexiness, musical tastes for any level of the brow. All this, and she's still a class act.

Or this is how it looks from our side of the Atlantic. I met Tharp last month at a horrendously noisy café table on Broadway, just opposite New York's great arts complex the Lincoln Centre, where her work is often seen. Perhaps it was the imminence of a birthday, her 57th, but she struck me as depressed.

I had been warned off personal matters - her one-time relationship with the Russian ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov, her won, her marriages or anything else. But whatever the trouble was, an important element is that she has been getting some bad press in the States, for making big ballets for companies such as American Ballet Theatre, the Royal Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, but also for her newest modern work, which is accused of recycling old ideas.

And yet, as a British stranger, I am struck by the affection that seems to drive all reactions to Tharp. If Twyla's doing well, it seems, all's right with America - that's how I read it. No British choreographer has wormed their way into the heart of their public the way she has.

"Well, if it were true, what you say," she said drily, making it clear that she thinks it is not, "it would be because I'm very direct. I'm unabashedly American." She values her Quaker, farm-country roots - "It's a way that genuinely represents American ideals in the sense of democracy and equality and hard work, and the public may respond to me for that kind of thinking."

Tharp's sternness is the key to her, for all her mischievous, glamorous, celebrity-relishing aggression. Even when her pieces amuse, they are never trifling, they treat Jelly Roll Morton as respectfully as they treat Pergolesi.

Twila (the y came later) grew up with a mother who refused to waste a minute of the day. She played multiple instruments, did dancing, sport, languages, schoolwork, and worked in her parents' drive-in theatre at the same time.

One can see why she must have revelled in the hard-living Sixties, with their artistic experimentation, decorative flair and fiery social controversies.

The Sixties are a running theme in her new *Tharp!* repertory. On Monday, the Barbican season gets a weird and wonderful start with her huge community-dance *The One Hundreds*, in which 100 Londoners in flares and Afro-wigs will learn and perform something that, she says, is her purest shot at "what dance is".

Lolling one sunny afternoon in the country in 1969, she felt "assaulted by sensorial experiences, and I thought, gee, this is what a dance is. It is this complicated, it is this rich. How can I do this? Then I thought,

'Easy, I'll make 100 segments of dance, each of 11 seconds, and perform them simultaneously!...'

She recruits her 100 performers locally wherever this brilliant ice-breaker is done, and each one has a little chunk. The climax of the "performance" is, of course, only 11 seconds long. (Sixties costume is mandatory.)

A MUCH darker experience is the second of her two triple bills. This links three highly contrasting pieces - the athletic *Heroes*, the ethereal *Sweet Fields* (set to Shaker hymns) and the jazzy road-moviesque *66* - in a triptych that to me runs a gamut of feelings about America today, anxiety about disillusion, superficial escapism, and a burning need to prize simple community faith.

Tharp hates anatomising her imagery because it reduces the imaginative pleasure for the audience, but what is obvious in her works is how uncommonly well she uses men.

"Well, that's because I like men," she said, with a small smile. "I am very strong for my size. I have regard for that component in men, and I think that often men are frightened by that component in themselves and don't want to see it aggrandised. But I revel in that sense of power, of endurance.

"Balanchine made dances for women that were beautiful because he loved women. I make dances for men that can be very powerful because I love men."

But the complicated *Heroes* questions the nature of that power and endurance. Tharp brooded rather bleakly on the way the nature of heroism has altered in her increasingly Disneyfied country.

"The piece is, in a way, about the decline on the part of leadership," she said. "In the past heroes used to do quite extraordinary exploits before they could be heroes. These days a guy who just stands his ground is a kind of hero. The three men in *Heroes* stand like a wall. They don't respond much to what happens around them, to the woman jumping up against them. But even though these guys have not done a single thing during this whole dance to advance it in a positive way, still they have stood and endured. It's an absolutely minimal definition of heroism. And that is where we are now."

Disneyfication, she warned, is "very special. Very dangerous, because it has so much money and many people think it is Entertainment-slash-Art. It usurps in children's brains more challenging material. And soon people are not going to be able to differentiate here."

The British, she said, have different standards because we are a monarchy and have an enduring respect for traditions and culture.

She loved working at the Royal Ballet on *Mr Worldly Wise*, even though the ballet itself was not a complete success (it is being revived this autumn at Sadler's Wells). In her country, she assured me, there isn't the "respect for work and for artists" that she finds in ours.

As we spoke, a bright red double-decker bus, unexpectedly, roared right past our table. "It's a tour bus," said Tharp, shaking with laughter, "it's supposed to make people feel they are in London." I felt that she's hoping for a rejuvenating shot of optimism in London.

Tharp!, at Barbican Theatre (0171 638 8891), Monday-Aug 8.