

BACKSTAGE east

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

185+ Casting Notices

DANCE/MOVEMENT

BY LISA JO SAGOLLA

Dance From the Fringe

Two years ago I stopped attending the dance performances presented by the New York International Fringe Festival, New York City's annual, late-summer celebration of offbeat performance work by young, unknown artists hailing from higher and yon. Prior to that I had spent the last few weeks of every August "Fringing it"—trucking downtown to some of Manhattan's seediest neighborhoods during the hottest weather of the year, being crammed into unkempt, stuffy studio spaces, and watching many of the worst dance productions I've ever seen. Last summer I returned to the Fringe Festival, but to review theatre events only. Generally speaking, the festival's theatre performances are far better than its dance offerings.

Feeling guilty at having abandoned Terpsichore, and faced with the dearth of dance activities in the city this time of year, I decided to spend this August revisiting the Fringe Festival's dance scene. I am happy to report that things on the Fringe's terpsichorean front have gotten a little bit better—not a lot better, but a little. The three dance performances I saw at the festival this year (which ran Aug. 11-27) were thought-provoking, well produced, and presented in comfortable venues, though each was mirrored by its own distinct and, unfortunately, major flaw.

of the city, sporting a half-black, half-white face—tries to explain why the poor couldn't leave New Orleans. We hear something about the government taking away someone's driver's license and a child having to hide his lunch money from his crack-addicted mother.

If James Vesce, the show's writer-director, could simply do a better job of delineating the obstacles that prevented many people from evacuating the city (they had no access to transportation; they were unable to arrange for a place to stay), *Rapson for New Orleans* might constitute an important theatrical portrait of a disgraceful chapter in recent American history. Congratulations to the show's zealous cast, especially rapper Jennifer Roberts and dancers B-boy Kwesi I (Joseph Kotay) and Donald Colson.



Jessica McKelvey, Anna Sullivan, Shelby Latimer and Anya Parke in *Anna and the Annadroids*

'Requiem for New Orleans'

The problem with *Rapson for New Orleans: A Hip Hop Ecology*, presented at the Actors' Playhouse, was its failure to explain persuasively why many New Orleans inhabitants remained in the city during Hurricane Katrina. A sensitive dance-theatre work presented by Twilight Repertory Company, a troupe affiliated with the Hip Hop Theater Lab at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, *Rapson for New Orleans* artfully combines elements of the traditional requiem mass, a New Orleans jazz funeral service, and hip-hop culture. The piece purports to pay homage to the victims of Katrina while situating our country's inept handling of the disaster within the larger contexts of social injustice, economic inequality, and racial discrimination. The well-intentioned work tries to elicit sympathy for the hurricane victims through heart-wrenching footage from television news coverage of the event, impassioned spoken-word passages, sorrowful classical music (beautifully sung by Caroline Clifton), and dances (curiously choreographed by Donell Sines) that borrow stylistically more heavily from contemporary concert-dance crafting than from hip-hop sensibilities.

Unfortunately, all of this is preceded by a lengthy sequence of video clips in which intelligent-sounding voices from the media and government outline the magnitude of the destruction to come and repeatedly urge everyone to evacuate New Orleans. In the face of these warnings, one can't help but wonder why anyone stayed in the city. Because *Rapson for New Orleans* never satisfactorily answers this question, the production's ability to evoke empathy for Katrina's victims is compromised, as is the potency of its larger political statements. In a confusing, much-too-brief speech, the show's narrator—a wonderfully vaudevillian symbol

'Anna and the Annadroids'

A glitchy, drop-dead-gorgeous multimedia dance piece presented at Dance New Amsterdam's spanking new performance space, *Anna and the Annadroids: The Robots' Dream Tour* suffers from the same ailments that it claims are plaguing American womanhood today. Conceived, directed, and choreographed by its principal dancer, the Columbus, Ohio-based Anna Sullivan, the show attempts to illustrate the ways in which conformity and consumerist values have overtaken and defined the lives of American women. We learn of this, however, largely through program notes that describe the production's narrative: An ensemble of robotic women are programmed to believe that they must look attractive and shop constantly, and those who develop a more progressive consciousness about their role in society go insane.

What a terrifically titillating concept for a performance piece! If only Sullivan's work wasn't so shallow, great-looking, and smacking of sameness. Isn't that exactly what she's protesting about the role contemporary society is forcing women to play? Sullivan's cast of six pretty, young females with perfect bodies and lily-white skin exudes number after number of not-very-interesting choreography dressed in never-ending changes of costume, one flashy outfit more stunningly sexy than the next. The aesthetics of this production couldn't be further from the typical grunge look of downtown dance events.

Obviously an expensive endeavor, *Anna and the Annadroids* also features live music, of the loud and forgettable variety, and gimmicky, dizzying video footage of frightening, oversized views of

the droids growing increasingly psychotic. Yet the show's attempt to cast a critical eye on consumerism and look-alike feminine ideals is undermined by the great pleasure it seems to take in presenting its upscale, superficial treats for the eye, as well as by the absence of any original expression of ideas through seriously developed choreographic work. Sullivan just restates her concept over and over, never offering the kind of intellectual stimulation that might lead us to reflect upon her observations in terms of our own life experiences or in a cultural context that extends beyond the boundaries of her production.

'Contra-Tiempo'

A joyous performance of very authentic-feeling salsa dancing created and performed by Ana Maria Alvarez and her company of dancers from Los Angeles, *Contra-Tiempo*, presented at Dance New Amsterdam, left us wanting more. The program's centerpiece, a complex group work also titled "Contra-Tiempo," comically explores the diversity of the salsa dancing community while also using the dance form to portray the thorny social and political issues facing Latinos in America today. The stage is filled with couples doing salsa, each in their own style; though strictly choreographed, the dancing evokes an air of true improvisation. One at a time, different individuals are illuminated as we hear a recording of their inner thoughts about the dance and what it means to them.

Emerging from the series of personal comments is the theme of dominance and a man's role as leader—on the dance floor, in relationships, and in society at large. This theme is smartly developed as the piece grows increasingly more theatrical. Hints of "The Dance at the Gym" from *War Saw Soley* creep into the proceedings and the choreography becomes violently aggressive. Battles for control contaminate the smooth phrasing of the salsa dancing. While Alvarez undoubtedly wants to challenge traditional notions of gender, power, and cultural assimilation, her piece, ironically, is most appealing during the sequences in which the male and female dancers exhibit smooth finesse as they salsa together in traditional style. It is, nonetheless, a marvelously energetic and affecting work.

"Contra-Tiempo" was bore-ended, however, by two underdeveloped endeavors. "Al Alma Ache," an animated film of adorably drawn dancing figures, opened the program. Created by Omar Rodriguez Diaz, the film was over before one could register any impression of its meaning, but it was such great fun that we felt cheated by its brevity.

Closing the program was "I Dream America," an extremely moving crossover that felt like an opening thematic statement—and a very promising one at that. What happened to the rest of the piece? One at a time, dancers cross diagonally through the space, traversing from upstage left to downstage right with slow-motion, salsa-seasoned, pedestrian movements. Their procession is accompanied by the recorded voice of a 12-year-old girl reading a poem she had written about her mother's courageous immigration to Los Angeles to make a better life for her family. The combination of the simple yet deeply felt choreography with the youngster's inspiring words suggests the beginnings of a monumental dance piece about the American immigrant experience. Please, Ana, will you complete the work? <

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