



Postmodern choreographer Jane Comfort, whose works are as cheeky as they are probing, appears at Jacob's Pillow this month.

By Amanda Smith - Photography by Arthur Elgort

For the past two decades Jane Comfort has had an unusually lively career in the world of dance theater. Her work, by turns serious, humorous, and provocative, has been seen in such bastions of the downtown scene as P.S. 122 and Dance Theater Workshop. Her choreography for drag queens has played Carnegie Hall and the Cannes Film Festival. She has worked off-Broadway (*Faith Healing*, a 1993 musical fantasy deconstruction of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*) and on Broadway (the choreography for the Stephen Sondheim-James Lapine 1994 musical, *Passion*). Last spring she reprised *Cliffs Notes: Macbeth* (1988), her thirty-five minute retelling of the Shakespearean classic as cautionary tale (the central characters are yuppies, and the finale, the Battle of Birnam Wood, is a hostile takeover done on cell phones). Last fall her Bessie Award-winning *Underground River*, about a woman in a coma, played DTW. This summer her ensemble, Jane Comfort and Company, will appear at Jacob's Pillow (July 29-August 1), with *Underground River* (1998) and *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous* (1996).

Born Jane Crews, she was raised in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, that unique, peculiar town

once dedicated to producing enriched uranium for the top-secret atomic bomb experiments in Los Alamos, New Mexico, during World War H. A fine arts major at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill majoring in painting, she spent the summer after graduation drawing pictures of explosions for the Museum of Atomic Energy. "It was so boring," she says. "I realized that I didn't want to be a commercial artist. The idea of going into a painting studio and facing a blank canvas was hell. I think Merce Cunningham said if you don't love the dailiness of your profession, you shouldn't be doing it."

Cunningham became an inspiration during 1967, her senior year, after she saw him perform *Place* when his company appeared at Chapel Hill. "He was in a plastic tube and falling across stage right as if this tube were enveloping him," she recalls. "It was so dramatic, [an] amazingly theatrical moment. It sent chills down my spine. I thought, This is what I could do better than paint."

Marriage and a stint in the Peace Corps intervened before she could study with him.

Jane Comfort and Company dancers in Comforts S/He (1995), a "meditation on gender": from left: Rebecca Hermos, Christina Redd, Edisa Weeks, Suzanne Nece, and Stephanie McKay.



In 1968 she married John Comfort, whom she had met in college, and after two years of service in Venezuela and traveling in South America, they moved to New York City. John went to work in banking. Jane enrolled in the intermediate class at the Cunningham studio and was promptly kicked out--or, rather, led out by the hand and firmly told that she had to join the beginners.

"Denial can be very helpful," she says. "I probably would not have been a dancer if I hadn't been in such heavy denial about starting so late." Eventually she got enough technique under her belt to be readmitted. "I desperately wanted to be in Merce's company," she says. "It became clear that it was like a convent; you had to be very quiet. I really had to keep my personality under wraps--we all did. We were all obsessed. You never knew when the hand was going to descend."

After four years' study, she began auditioning elsewhere and was chosen by James Cunningham, the zany dance-theater maker: "People thought I'd lost my mind--if not one Cunningham, then the other. I could let my personality out. It was such a relief. You had to sing, act, dance, improvise--it was a real blossoming time for me."

She stayed with the company for two years, then began making her own work in 1978: "A friend had told me about

this performance piece that Joan Jonas had done where she lay nude on the floor with a little pocket mirror. I was intrigued with that concept. I started rhythmically touching parts of my body--maybe I was trying to make sure I was still there because I was making such a switch in identity. It had this side shift to it." The result was *Steady Shift*, "a very structured, very minimal, touching thing, a woman's piece in a way," Comfort says. Her first concert lasted twenty-eight minutes. "I told people it was going to be forty because I was afraid they wouldn't come."

Then she became interested in making dances for hands, studied American Sign Language, and created *Sign Story* (1979), a piece inspired by Gertrude Stein's *Many, Many Women*. Comfort signed as Marjorie Gamso read the text. "It felt so right," Comfort recalls. "I can't think of another moment in my life that felt like that--like I was encased in a crystal egg. I never stopped talking after that. Language is the defining thing in my work."

For a piece called *Eatless Textures* (1981) Comfort made up her own sign language, gestures, and rhythms. "That worked," she says, "so then I started wanting to write my own text. I kept journals. But I didn't look at them because I knew that if I tried to analyze what was there, I would never put it on a public stage."

Comfort's Underground River (1998); McKay (left) and Stephen Nunley are leaping over Aleta Hayes and Cynthia Bueschel



After the show, I would look. It was my life, creeping up through the floorboards."

Studying Afro-Brazilian dance, she became fascinated by its polyrhythms and movement vocabulary, which led to works like *Incorrect Translations* (1982), for which she formed Jane Comfort and Company, and *Artificial Horizon* (1983). "At that point, in the eighties," she says, "percussion and was the only music I wanted to work with because text was the melodic line. I went from abstract rhythmic language to narrative linear."

In 1990 she settled on material for a major work about growing up in the South and made the first part of *Department*; it dealt with race, how children are taught prejudice, and, as Comfort says, "the polite way of being bigoted. There's a way you can be funny and extremely prejudiced and it's totally acceptable, at least in the South. There's a line that everybody knows and you teach your children that."

Mark Dendy, who was in her small company at the time, had also grown up in the region. "Mark was less fearful than I about showing the ugly part of the South," Comfort recalls. "He embraced the insanity, the ugly, the prejudice because he loved them and he loved the South. He had a lot of love in his heart. I had a lot of denial in my heart. It was great for me to be around him because I was able to open my eyes and take in where I came from with more love--even as you mock it and imitate it."

Mark Russell, director of PS122 and a native Texan, suggested that Comfort also cover racism in the North, so *Department* acquired a Northern section about the issues

of violence and control that ended with a rape. Such grim matters caused some domestic conflict for Comfort: she had used her SoHo loft to create and rehearse but now she had two young children, Gardiner and Claire, and rehearsals and language had to be altered for the children's sake.

Comfort was dealing with more than the usual trials of parenthood: her son was diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome, the disorder marked by uncontrollable twitches and outbursts. "The fact that Gardiner has Tourette's syndrome has made for a more intense parenting experience," Comfort says. "Because of some of the reading disabilities that have gone with it-- he's a very bright kid-- he learns better in certain subjects if he hears the information, so I used to sit and do his homework verbally with him. It's a huge effort, but one nice thing is that I've been reeducated in everything. Ask me about the Second Continental Congress.

"I only did one concert without a child around. Parenthood makes for such a richer field from which to draw. I always knew I had to have children and I had to have a career. I would have been an insane mother if I hadn't an outlet for my art mind, and I would have been an insane choreographer if I weren't a mother. But it is unbelievable how much energy it takes."

There was always energy left for work. In *Faith Healing* she brilliantly plumbed *The Glass Menagerie*, making movement integral to her vision and casting Dendy as the mother, Amanda. Nancy Alfaró, who danced with Comfort for ten years and was Comfort's voice onstage, was the daughter, Laura; Scot Willingham was Tom, the brother; and David Neuman was the Gentleman Caller, who appears as Superman and teaches Laura to roller-skate. The piece played first at P.S. 122 then at Classic Stage Company for an Off-Broadway run. "As theatrical as my work was becoming," Comfort says, "I wasn't thinking about the theater world. What a schism it is--like the River Styx. Theater people don't come to look at dance."

Nevertheless, Comfort responded to a call from a friend, Ira Weitzman, head of musical theater at Lincoln Center, who told her that

Comfort dancers cut loose in *S/He* (from left): Weeks, Viola Sheely, Deborah Jackson and Nancy Alfaro



Sondheim was doing a new musical *Passion*, and that the director, James Lapine, had asked Weitzman if knew any downtown choreographers who would be appropriate for a show set in 1863 about an Italian spinster obsessed with a beautiful young soldier. Lapine ultimately offered Comfort the job.

Sitting through forty-eight previews of *Passion* taught Comfort a great deal about Broadway. "The show was being worked on, rewritten, readjusted every single night before it was ever put up before the press," she recalls. "It was amazing to me because, as a dancer, you work on your piece, you put it up opening night; that's when you get reviewed, and three nights later you close. It's an absurd concept."

After *Passion*, Comfort moved on to *S/He* (1995), her revue about gender reversal. The most stunning scene is the opener, where Andre Shoals, a six-foot black drag queen who had worked with Comfort since the early 1990s, plays a woman and Comfort appears beside him in drag as a comparatively puny white guy with a little goatee; gradually the two change clothes and reclaim their sexes. She used to see Shoals perform as Aphrodite. "I thought he was incredible," she says. "He certainly went beyond any drag I had ever seen. It was fascinating--also to be on tour with him and watch him transform himself."

Comfort was subsequently invited to choreograph the film musical *Francesca Page*, which went to the Sundance and Cannes festivals but has yet to be released commercially. In connection with its screening at Cannes, in 1997, Comfort staged a drag show. She was asked by Varla Jean Merman to stage some numbers in a Christmas

spectacular at Carnegie Hall, then did another drag piece that became *Tell Tale* and ran first at P.S. 122, then off-Broadway.

A trip to Bali inspired some of the movement in *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous*, her 1996 dance expressing her outrage at the GOP's stripping away the safety net for the poor and its "gleeful sense of a mandate to kill off the NEA." Set to sound bites of such politicians Newt Gingrich, the dance featured Clinton and Dole as Bunraku puppets and a final section, "In the Garden of Abundance," that used Balinese imagery in movement, costuming, and fans. She sees this section as "the abundant, creative mind, juxtaposed with the fear and loathing of the far right. That section is highly physical, and I made it in my most crippled state."

At the time she was suffering acute muscle pain caused, it was finally discovered, by a small benign cyst of spinal fluid that required neurosurgery. Her painfully slow recuperation directly inspired last year's magical *Underground River*, in which four dancers in white and artist Basil Twist's superb little white cloth puppet represent the mind of a comatose patient. "Lying in bed one morning," Comfort recalls, "I had this image of a woman in a coma. Coming out of the surgery, I wasn't sure I could ever get out of bed and make another dance. It came from that feeling, and that's probably why that idea stuck. There were deeper reasons I didn't know at the time. Then it became a young woman and the parents and the doctor trying to bring her back. Then it became the idea of double realities -- her reality and their reality. Her reality became a vibrant artistic life, and that's what became the metaphor." The dance, she eventually came to realize, was also about mourning her daughter's diminished creativity as she encountered the fact-based curriculum of middle school. Comfort says, "The real thing that the piece is about is creativity and how you hold on to it."

Ever the experimenter at heart, she says, "I'm always looking for the metaphor in the structure. I don't think I ever just wanted to make a dance. Now I want to do story and music. I'm trying to figure out a nonhierarchical way to make theater in which no one element dominates, and you don't get the story in just a linear way. That's the goal."

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