

PILLOW NOTES

by Maura Keefe

Jane Comfort is at home in the dance world; she is, first and foremost, a choreographer. But she has never allowed this primary identity to mean that she must solely concern herself with movement. She places no limits on the ingredients in her dances: movement yes, but also talking, singing, and visual elements. She leaves no theatrical apparatus unexplored, no means of expression unexamined. That said, there is plenty of dancing in these works. For each of her pieces, Comfort cultivates a personal and idiosyncratic movement style derived from a wide scope of physical actions, including a variety of dance techniques, as well as gestures, and pedestrian activities.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of her choreography has long been her use of words. Her text-driven dances combine the voice with the moving body to demonstrate the significant eloquence of dance. While this blending of disciplines may be familiar to 21st century audiences, it was startling when Comfort began her explorations. For so long, dance had been defined purely as a means of non-verbal expression.

Comfort has noted that when she started to talk in her dance performances, “in 1979, almost no one was, but I knew [it] was the right path for me...” In her dances, talking (and singing) and dancing have a sense of equality. She works to “create theater in which movement and language exist in a non-hierarchical relationship, each deepening the meaning of the other until the truest story emerges.” Comfort does not add words to dances because they are needed to speak for the movement. Rather, the talking and the moving are in a dialogue. The interaction between the dancing and talking is in constant transition in Comfort’s dances.

In some of her works, Comfort challenges the dependence audiences may place on words by suggesting a context where the words and their meanings make sense, and then negating that context. For example, in *Soap Opera* (performed at the Pillow in 1988), the dancers stage a banal tale of romance and deceit. A man and a woman enact an amorous scene only to be interrupted by the alleged “real-life” partner of the man. The stereotype of the jealous woman is played broadly, familiarly, with sweeping gestures. The movement and the talking suddenly reverse direction, however, and the piece unwinds backward in the exact order it developed. The jealous gestures retrograde, the tender embraces come apart, and the text is nonsensical. Comfort allows the audience to think that the surprise of the piece resides in the interruption of the staged scene by the third character, but by rewinding the whole scene she further thwarts convention. She uses the recognizable narrative of a love triangle to lull the audience—only to abruptly topple our understanding. The performers’ ability to move as easily backwards as forwards through the text and movement heightens the capriciousness of the piece.

Comfort’s interest in toying with traditions and audience expectations is characteristic of much of her work. For example, in *S/he* (1995), she creates distinctly gendered roles by drawing on familiar, pedestrian movements and contemporary language only to defy

these stereotypes. In the opening section, once the characters are clearly established as a man and a woman, they shift genders, changing costumes and taking on the other character's mannerisms of speech and gesture. The dancers' deft transformations wittily and persuasively remind us that we all perform various gender roles every day.

Comfort combines this appetite for a wide range of movement styles with an acutely trained visual eye. She trained as a painter prior to concentrating on choreography. Her works reveal a fluency with visual images that is at once painterly and kinesthetic. Her visual appetite leads her to seek out collaborators who will add to the look and action of the work. For *Underground River* (1998), that element came from her collaboration with noted puppeteer Basil Twist. The visual pleasure of the dancing puppet is matched by the exquisite movement on the part of the performers turned puppeteers.

Comfort's love of movement and words is matched by her deep appreciation for communicating through music. Her musical collaborators include DJs and percussionists, composers and vocalists. In *Underground River* (which was created in part while in residence at the Pillow), Comfort worked with composer Toshi Reagon to build a score paralleling her investigations with words and movement, juxtaposing meaningless words against intelligible speech to create oppositional worlds. This contrast creates a tension between two distinct realms in which different voices clamor, tugging for the full presence of a character who has one foot in each world. The dancers, already trained in dancing and talking, now also become vocalists of the haunting melodies. Their tuneful singing creates an alluring world rich and flavored with harmonies; it is at once tempting and spiritual. In contrast, the recorded text feels presumptive, as it abruptly interrupts this other-word. The disembodied voices yearn to be noticed, but have the magnetism of the singing and dancing bodies. While not discordant, the two worlds cannot co-exist. Comfort presents the choice between them as essential and sorrowful.

An American Rendition (2008) again asked the dancers to move, talk, and sing as Comfort once again explored two deeply different worlds. *Rendition* reminded us that Comfort is fearless, trusting that dances can and should be about anything and everything. As dance writer Suzanne Carbonneau says: "the aptly-named Comfort has given voice and succor to the disaffected and marginalized: to drag queens, the homeless, gays and lesbians, the suppressed, the abused, the afflicted. She has taken to heart the idea that art is a place where we can enter the imaginations of others, and by doing so, develop compassion, empathy, and some degree of understanding for those who are different from us."

