

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY



**“Jane Comfort is one of the most fertile minds in the theater of mixed forms.”**

**The New York Times**

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

## CURRENT REPERTORY

## BEAUTY



Directed by **Jane Comfort**

Choreography by  
**Jane Comfort & Company**

Text: **Jane Comfort & Company**

Dramaturgy: **Anne Davison**

Sets and Costumes: **Liz Prince**

Lighting Design: **David Ferri**

Sound Design: **Brandon Wolcott**

Performers:

**Lucie Baker**

**Leslie Cuyjet**

**Sean Donovan**

**Ellie Harrison**

**Petra van Noort**

**Meredith Riley Stewart**

*Beauty* is a dance theater work about the American notion of female beauty and the obsessive pursuit of physical perfection in a culture of impossibly retouched and Photoshopped models throughout our media. *Beauty* includes a Barbie beauty contest in which random members of the audience select each night's beauty queen. It addresses eating disorders, extreme plastic surgeries, body perception, gendered use of space, and the public conversation about women's bodies. The movement vocabulary is derived from an investigation of Barbie's limited, robotic abilities (Barbie and Ken have an intimate encounter as only those two stiff jointed dolls can) contrasted with a fully expressive dance vocabulary. During the course of the evening, we become acquainted with the performers as Barbie dolls, as beauty contestants, as characters with beauty aspirations, and as the dancers behind all these personas. *Beauty* offers both a wickedly funny and poignant view of our compliance with the multi-billion dollar beauty industry.

*Beauty* is performed in repertory with the Bessie Award winning *Underground River*, which is an exploration of the rich fantasy life of a girl who appears to the outside world to be unconscious.

*Beauty* and *Underground River* present an evening in which one piece looks at outer beauty and the other at inner beauty, both complimenting and deepening each other's message.

*Beauty* was created with the support of a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant.

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*Photos by Arthur Elgort and Christopher Duggan*

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

## *UNDERGROUND RIVER*



Conception/Direction/Text by  
**Jane Comfort**

Choreography by  
**Jane Comfort & Company**

Music: **Toshi Reagon**

Visual Effects: **Basil Twist**

Costumes: **Liz Prince**

Lighting Design: **David Ferri**

Original Performers:

**Aleta Hayes**  
**Stephanie McKay**  
**Stephen Nunley**  
**Cynthia Svigals**

Current Performers:

**Lucie Baker**  
**Leslie Cuyjet**  
**Ellie Harrison**  
**Petra van Noort**

Recorded Voices:

**Leslie Nipkow**  
**Larkin Malloy**  
**Emilv Weiner**

***Underground River***, winner of a 1998 BESSIE Award as a "risk-taking and profound theatrical tour de force," is an exploration of the rich fantasy life of a girl who appears to the outside world to be unconscious. Singing a cappella songs by Toshi Reagon and interacting with the magical visual creations of master puppeteer Basil Twist, the dancers dwell in a world of magic realism and eccentric beauty unseen by those who wish to make her "well." Comfort looks at an inner world of play, song, and joy, contrasted with what we know to be the "real" world.

It was originally commissioned by the Jacob's Pillow/Pillow Work series in 1997. It premiered in 1998 at PS122 and has been performed since at venues throughout the US and Latin America. It is currently being performed in a shared evening with ***Beauty***.

"The gentle movements, patronizing tone of the psychiatrist's voice, toy-like flying fishes and the wee marionette the dancers charmingly manipulate fashion a touching child-like ambience. The dancers sing and move with a bouyance that is almost magical, they seem to transform the hard-surfaced floor into a pillowy cloud and hold the audience within their web."

Phyllis Goldman **Backstage**

***Underground River*** was created with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Harkness Foundation.

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# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

## MISSION

**JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY** creates dance theater works that push the intersection of movement and language to a new form of theater. Called by the *New York Times* "a postmodernist pioneer in the use of verbal material in dance" and by *The Village Voice* "one of the most original choreographers on the downtown scene," artistic director Jane Comfort addresses contemporary social and cultural issues with compassion and wit. The company is an extraordinary group of dancers, actors, and singers whose multiple talents allow Jane Comfort to create deeply layered works utilizing a wide range of theatrical elements, from pure dance to chanted texts, a cappella singing, film, lip-syncing, cross dressing, acted scenes, and puppetry. The company creates theater in which transformation occurs through many voices.

## BIOGRAPHY

**JANE COMFORT** is a choreographer, writer, and director known for issue-oriented works integrating text and movement. She grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and received her BA in painting at the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill. Since 1978 she has created almost 50 dance/theater works, many of them evening-length, that have been presented throughout the United States, in Europe, and in Latin America. She also works in theater and opera, and choreographed the Broadway musicals *Passion*, by Stephen Sondheim, and *Amour*, by Michel Legrand as well as Shakespeare in the Park's *Much Ado About Nothing* and the Off Broadway musical *Wilder* at Playwrights Horizons. In 2006 she choreographed Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of *Salome* with Deborah Voigt in the title role.

She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2010, a BESSIE Award for *Underground River* in 1998, a Collaboration Award from the Coalition of Professional Women in the Arts and Media in 2006 for her collaboration with composer Joan La Barbara on *Fleeting Thoughts*, a Doris Duke Award for New Work in 2000, and a Habie Award for distinguished service to the arts from the University of North Carolina in 2003. Jane has been a board member of The Field since 1998 and was a founder of the Gender Project. She was the 2008 artist mentor to the Sugar Salon, which supports emerging female choreographers.

**JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY** has pioneered the possibilities of multidisciplinary dance since 1978 with dance/theater works that push the limit of what is normally considered dance or drama to achieve a new form of theater. These works have been produced throughout the United States, Europe, and in Latin America. Comfort's work often comments on social and political issues and lately has focused on identity. The company has been invited to perform excerpts of its newest piece, *Beauty*, at the 2012 TedxEast Conference in May at Alice Tully Hall. Through the NEA's American Masterpieces grant program and a National Performance Network commission, the company restaged its seminal *Faith Healing*, produced by the Joyce Theater, in 2010. The company's recent work, *An American Rendition*, made in collaboration with Joan La Barbara and Steve Miller and commissioned by the National Performance Network and NYS Council on the Arts, was selected by both Thirteen WNET and Gay City News as Best of 2008 Performances. The company was one of only two American dance companies selected by Performing Americas to collaborate with a Latin American dance company in 2007 to create a new work. Other recent company works include *Fleeting Thoughts*, commissioned and produced by Danspace Project, with live music by Joan La Barbara; *Persephone*, commissioned by The Joyce Theater and NPN, with live music by Tigger Benford and visual design by Keith Sonnier; *Asphalt*, a dance/opera with book and lyrics by Carl Hancock Rux, vocal score by Toshi Reagon and instrumental score by DJ Spooky; and *Underground River*, with a vocal score by Toshi Reagon and visual effects by Basil Twist, for which Comfort won a Bessie Award.

The company has been presented by such venues as Lincoln Center, The Joyce Theater, PS 122, Off-Broadway at Classic Stage Company, Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, and DTW in New York, The American Center in Paris, Antwerp's de Singel Theater, Actors Theatre of Louisville, the International Festival of Londrina, Brazil, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, American Dance Festival, Bates Dance Festival, New Orleans' Contemporary Art Center, DC's Dance Place, and many theaters and colleges across the US. Jane Comfort and Company has received the Doris Duke Award for New Work, fourteen grants and fellowships from the NEA, as well as support from Creative Capital Foundation, MAP Fund, NYSCA, the Fund for U.S. Artists, BUILD, the New England Foundation for the Arts, Arts International, the Mary Flagler Cary Foundation, American Music Center, Altria Group, The Harkness Foundation for Dance, the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and many other organizations.



# INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF MODERN DANCE

## COMFORT, Jane

American dancer, choreographer, and company director

**Born:** 15 October 1945. **Education:** Degree in painting, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1967; studied in New York with Merce Cunningham. **Career:** Danced with James Cunningham, 1976-78; began choreographing, 1978; founded her own troupe, Jane Comfort and Company.

**Awards:** Numerous grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, Harkness Foundation, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, *Dance Magazine* Foundation, and others.

### Works

1978 *Steady Shift*

1982 *Incorrect Translations*

1983 *Artificial Horizon*

1985 *TV Love*

1986 *Cliffs Notes: Macbeth*

1989 *Portrait*

1990 *Deportment: South*

1991 *Deportment: North*

1993 *Faith Healing*

1995 *S/He*

1996 *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous*

**Other works include:** Choreography for the Tony award winning Broadway musical *Passion* (Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine), and for the film *Francesca Page*, shown at the Sundance Film Festival and Cannes Film Festival, 1997.

\* \* \*

Jane Comfort is an artist whose interests and work span the white trash and debutante's world of the American south, the gender and race wars of contemporary American, and the political implications of living in a world where images and sound bites have created their own reality--a world of multiple, meaningless meanings. Somehow, Comfort strives to confront preconceptions and ignorance with all the humor, grace, and power that a fine artist possesses.

Comfort began her career as a visual artist at the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill. Her interests quickly turned to dance, and she moved to New York where she began to train at the Merce Cunningham studio, and soon after to perform with Jamie Cunningham. Comfort is extremely comfortable in all artistic venues, including the visual, the kinetic, the musical, and the theatrical. One of the first modern choreographers to fully integrate text and movement in the past two decades, Comfort concerned herself first with the musicality of words and phrases, studying how

they could be combined with abstract movement without jarring the audience as they shifted from the nonliteral to the literal forms.

Comfort felt that working with text was natural to her, explaining, "When I started talking [in dance performances] in 1979, almost no one was, but I knew it was the right path for me." In addition, Comfort commented, "Most choreographers, it seems, hire writers to create texts in collaborations. I have always written my own, or 'co-existed' with the masters," as in such works as 1986's *Cliffs Notes: Macbeth* and 1990's *Faith Healing*. "I think by writing my own texts, I have been more in touch with the rhythms that entered our bodies," Comfort says, intending to "create theater in which movement and language exists in a non-hierarchical relationship, each deepening the meaning of the other until the truest story emerges." Gradually, Comfort built upon this skill and has now developed a seamless, choreographic style which easily bridges the integration of text with movement, acting, and song. She is without equal in this area, and this has given her work an unusual degree of accessibility while allowing her to develop content that is difficult to sustain in most abstract genres. Her dancers are as much singers and actors as they are dancers--ultimately, they are consummate performers who are as generous and willing with audiences as any company performing today. The *Washington Post* describes Comfort's work as a "truly new form," as it weaves, in Wagnerian fashion, a *gesamkunstwerk* of modern proportions.

Comfort's movement style is difficult to describe, and, in some ways, is often lost in the context of the works she creates. With so much going on visually, musically, theatrically, and choreographically, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the subtlety of dancing which is so fully integrated into the content of the piece. With her work, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the movement is always supportive of the message, and that by this very virtue, it seems to disappear into the meaning of the dance. Still, Comfort can be credited with creating some breathless moments of pure dance in her choreography, as in the final movement of 1996's *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous*, a departure from Balinese fan dances, and the exquisite duet for two men in *S/He* from 1995. A *Village Voice* review commented that "Comfort, having bravely spoken out from both heart and enraged intelligence, now shows the heart of dancing itself."

Comfort has a unique capacity to see the underbelly of human life in compassionate terms, which delineates both the humor and pathos of much of her work. Her skill as an artist is strongly linked to her way of noticing the banal details that structure human life. For most of us, these details dominate our lives, forming a kind of imprisonment of ignorance. Comfort ranks a first-rate artist who takes it upon herself to wake us from our sleepwalking--allowing us to participate in the weird richness of a life which rejects nothing.

---Peggy Berg

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY



## Critics' Quotes

"What I long to see in the world around me today is more of the "changeless basic material" used by all truly brave artists: the changeless basic material of passion. This is why it was so thrilling to see Jane Comfort and Company at the Joyce Theater last week."

**The New York Times**

"I've been rushing about to plays, concerts, dance, and last week, I saw art--ART--at Jacob's Pillow with Jane Comfort and Company."

**The Berkshire Eagle**

"The guiding spirits behind the theater of mixed forms are often choreographers. Theatrical directors may not be able to choreograph, but a dance-trained artist is used to conceiving the integration of movement with rhythm: the rhythm of music and even words, spoken or sung. That is what Jane Comfort, one of the most fertile minds in this genre, has realized so effectively."

**The New York Times**

"Few of Comfort's peers who are into dance drama have her gift for melding singing, vocalizing, speech and movement into an inseparable whole...Words, music and movement seethe together; united, their rhythms whirl the morsels of meaning into life stories."

**The Village Voice**

"Comfort has now developed a seamless choreographic style which easily bridges the integration of text with movement, acting, and song. She is without equal in this area."

**International Dictionary of Modern Dance**

"Jane Comfort stretches the limits of what is customarily meant by dance or drama to achieve a truly new form."

**The Washington Post**

"Jane Comfort is one of the most original choreographers on the downtown scene."

**The Village Voice**

"Jane Comfort, (is) a choreographer who's tackled political issues with passion and mordant wit...Aided by her splendid colleagues, Comfort stitches her disparate materials together with almost faultless theatrical skill."

**The Village Voice**

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY



Photo by Christopher Duggan

## CRITIC'S QUOTES FOR *BEAUTY*

"Beauty is wickedly funny."

Claudia La Rocco **The New York Times**

"The aptly named Comfort approaches the subject matter of her dances with gentle humor and nostalgia. Tiptoeing into areas where some might fear to tread - cosmetic surgery, a possibly comatose child - Comfort makes even Barbie a sympathetic character."

Janine Parker **The Boston Globe**

"Fantastic and fascinating...Like the best of dance theater, "Beauty" isn't preachy. Instead Comfort creates a space for viewers to think about women, bodies and society while watching movement..."Beauty" is right on."

Rebecca Ritzel **The Washington Post**

"It's a work of extremes — extreme appearances, extreme movement, and extreme discomfort as we observe how universally we are all implicated in the perpetuation of these unnatural ideals. Comfort's choreographic voice is articulate, insightful, and strong, and her medium (the dancers, movements, sounds, and visual elements of her work) communicates a series of messages that beg and deserve to be heard."

Anna Rogovoy **The Rogovoy Report**

"The dramaturgy behind Jane Comfort's gimlet-eyed pageant in *Beauty*, on delicious display at Jacob's Pillow Doris Duke Theatre this past week, is spot-on. Petra van Noort is coached in the hyperfeminine lexicon of the catwalk. Svelte, young Lucie Baker has her body redrawn with a black marker to refine it for the plastic surgeon's scalpel. Leslie Cuyjet's glamorous image is Photoshopped, click after click, to refresh as thinner, taller, and whiter-skinned until the model is unrecognizable....seeing the work with a live audience was a revelation. Gasps and sighs around me conveyed that the facts of the soul-killing self-appraisal that has become part and parcel of the beauty trade are not all common knowledge."

Debra Cash **The Boston Phoenix**

# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY



Photo by Christopher Duggan

## CRITIC'S QUOTES FOR *UNDERGROUND RIVER*

### REVIVAL 2011-2012

"The dancers perform Comfort's breezy choreography, simple skips and softly generous leaps, with such delicate ease that you can imagine the grass beneath their feet. A tiny puppet, the creation of the puppeteer Basil Twist, is extracted from the cage of an umbrella that floats down to these dreamgirls. They manipulate its limbs, first in funny little marches and kicks, and then it soars, swims, and floats across the stage. The vision is playfully mysterious and achingly beautiful."

Janine Parker **The Boston Globe**

"In addition to how expertly she works in a multidisciplinary format, *River* is a testament to Comfort's inventive use of text as a sound score."

Anna Rogovoy **The Rogovoy Report**

"Dressed in Liz Prince's layered white costumes, Ms. Baker, Ms. Cuyjet, Ms. Harrison and Ms. van Noort are adept at subtly taking on the miens and mannerisms of a stubborn little girl, as voices from the material world attempt to make contact with her."

Claudia La Rocco **The New York Times**

### ORIGINAL 1998

The choreography is good, eclectic stuff, and in the end the cumulative elements coalesce into a poetic and touching image of a descent into nothingness...Poetry and drama come together poignantly."

Anna Kisselgoff **The New York Times**

"The gentle movements, patronizing tone of the psychiatrist's voice, toy-like flying fishes and the wee marionette the dancers charmingly manipulate fashion a touching child-like ambience. The dancers sing and move with a bouyance that is almost magical, they seem to transform the hard-surfaced floor into a pillowy cloud and hold the audience within their web."

Phyllis Goldman **Backstage**

"In *Underground River*, Comfort puts to more delicate, sober uses her gift for the telling incongruity, for images that, brushed together, ignite thought...The deeper meanings of the piece emerge with stunning force from



# JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

## RESIDENCY ACTIVITIES

Jane Comfort and Company has an extensive history of working with colleges and universities through performance and education. The company teaches master classes in technique, composition, vocal techniques, language/text, and creating works with social commentary as well as pre and post show talks and public lectures about the work. The residency activities are often associated with the performance content and the presented work. The themes of the company’s current work, *Beauty*, deal with female beauty standards and practices.

**Lecture/Demonstrations** offer live performance or various scenes from the repertory, including video showings. This is followed with an informal discussion with the audience about the genesis of the work, how certain scenes were built, how a particular movement vocabulary became a metaphor for a social issue, how the text is laid into the movement, etc. A lecture/demonstration can be combined with an extended workshop in which participants develop their own performance piece based on social issues.

**Performance Workshops** focus on how to make a performance piece that deals with social issues. Warm up activities include acting and movement improvisations followed by discussions of structural options for performance and the social issues involved. Small groups or individuals develop short pieces that are shared with the group.

**Movement Text Workshops** introduce students to simple compositional techniques for voice and body. Students are given basic breath and vocal techniques to open up emotionally. The class then explores movement and text modules that are built into quick study structures.

**Repertory Workshops** introduces students to extended segments of the company’s work, with an emphasis on scenes that include both speaking and movement.

**Question and Answer** sessions and open dialogues are available with the audience both before and after performances.

The company is available to meet with women’s groups, gay alliances, women’s shelters and student organizations to discuss the gender and race issues involved in our work. The lecture/demonstration and performance workshop combination is particularly successful with high school and college students.

# The Washington Post



**By Rebecca Ritzel, Published: October 2**

A good, say, 37 percent of dance presentation is choosing the right companies and works for a venue. It's never fun to see a small-scale work swallowed up at George Mason University (and performed before a half-empty house) or dancers sandwiched between a curtain and a wall at Dance Place (even if the house is packed).

Which is why the folks at American Dance Institute look like geniuses for opening the inaugural season of their renovated theater in Rockville with Jane Comfort's six-member company. Saturday's show sold out; Sunday's came close. And the actual performance? Fantastic and fascinating.

The troupe performed "Underground River," Comfort's heartbreaking 1998 collaboration with puppeteer Basil Twist, and "Beauty," a new work that debuted at Jacob's Pillow in June. "Beauty" is bookended by a pageant for Barbies: four star-spangled dancers in padded-boob bodysuits.

As the women demonstrate with comic ease, it's awkward just walking when top-heavy, or waving with an arm fused at an angle, or having sex without bending your legs. Thanks to Lucie Baker, as Barbie No. 1, and Sean Donovan, as Ken, for the mock plastic copulation.

Like the best works of dance theater, "Beauty" isn't preachy. Instead, Comfort creates a space for viewers to think about women, bodies and society while watching movement. There's a great scene featuring Donovan as a relationship counselor who decodes female body language — who-cares hair flips and come-hither hip thrusts. Later, Barbie No. 3 (Ellie Harrison) works out with a personal trainer, then goes on a rant about vanity sizing.

When the dancers return wearing sequins for the pageant finale, emcee Donovan has a little surprise for the audience: Help crown a winner! Congrats to Leslie Cuyjet, Barbie No. 4, who stands in the spotlight waving while the other dancers get to relax, remove their hair extensions and don street clothes. Turns out, pageant-winning charm is deceitfully limiting, but "Beauty" is right on.

# {The Rogovoy Report}

A compendium of cultural news and observations by Seth Rogovoy



## Jane Comfort and Co. at Jacob's Pillow

July 2, 2011

**Jane Comfort and Company (photo Arthur Elgort)**

**JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL**

[Jane Comfort and Company](#)

June 29-July 3, 2011

Review by Anna Rogovoy

(BECKETT, Mass., June 30, 2011) — “It’s always a surprise with Jane,” said Ella Baff, executive director of **Jacob’s Pillow**, as she welcomed audiences to **Jane Comfort and Company**’s performance in the Doris Duke Theatre on Thursday night. On the program were two works, *Beauty* and *Underground River*, and surprising they were — but maybe not in the way you would expect.

*Beauty* begins with a woman — Lisa Niedermeyer, a former company member returning as a guest in this engagement — getting ready to go out. With no apparent perception of the audience, she primps and preens in front of a mirrored vanity for most of the piece: putting on makeup, shaving her legs, wrestling herself into a pair of Spanx, etc. Her focus makes these routine and familiar tasks mesmerizing and a little frightening as we watch her transformation.

But the main event of the work is a beauty pageant: the “Barbie Beauty Contest.” Four dancers dressed in gaudy leotards pivot and pose robotically, only moving as much as Mattel’s plastic toy could have, as a voiceover dialogue between an emcee and each “Barbie” brings peals of laughter from the audience (“Do you have any causes that you champion?” “I do, actually. Swans.”). Comfort creates a series of vignettes such as this one, each different in specific content, all addressing the theme of society’s warped perception of feminine beauty. It’s a work of extremes — extreme appearances, extreme movement, and extreme discomfort as we observe how universally we are all implicated in the perpetuation of these unnatural ideals.

Men are implicated through Sean Donovan, the only male performer, who appears in a range of roles: as a runway coach, a video-blogger discussing “I.O.I.’s” (Indicators of Interest), a personal trainer, and a plastic surgeon who draws abstract circles and lines on the body of dancer Lucie Baker, presumably identifying “problem spots.”

Women are implicated when, even during a monologue about preferring tomboyish activities, Baker straps on high-heeled leather boots in which she and the other dancers perform an explicitly sexual music video-style number, suggesting that they have not yet found the courage to rebel that we — and Comfort — wish they could.

And we as spectators are implicated when, at the end of the piece, the house lights are illuminated and a select number of audience members are handed pencils and paper and asked to vote for the evening's Barbie Beauty Queen. The results are tallied, a queen is chosen (Petra van Noort), and she stands stiff and alone as the "losers" strip off their makeup and change from their gaudy costumes into street clothes, gathering their things and walking offstage together. They are relaxed and as beautiful as we have seen them.

*Underground River* deals with darker stuff. Again, a voiceover dialogue informs us that there are characters here: Cara, a young girl, her parents, and a doctor. As the three adults coax Cara into squeezing their hands or signaling them with a blink, four women — Baker, van Noort, Leslie Cuyjet, and Elinor Harrison — perform fluid, sweeping movement phrases, sing, and manipulate puppets by Basil Twist.

In addition to how expertly she works in a multidisciplinary format, *River* is a testament to Comfort's inventive use of text as a sound score. The performers almost never obliquely "perform" the words. Rather, they interpret the meaning and respond to the rhythms and melodies of the voices. As Cara is limited in her communication to the smallest gestures, the four dancers are restricted to abstraction. It's moving in its simplicity and in the honesty and unafraid presences before us on the stage. Comfort's choreographic voice is articulate, insightful, and strong, and her medium (the dancers, movements, sounds, and visual elements of her work) communicates a series of messages that beg and deserve to be heard.



# The Virtual Dancer

## *Embodying the Invisible*

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

THERE'S A VIRTUAL presence in Jane Comfort's *Underground River* too—only it's not a product of modern technology. It's a small white puppet made of tied-together rags and slim sticks for manipulating each limb. Four dancers miraculously assemble this creation of Basil Twist's out of parts they pluck from a suspended umbrella they're circling. Not long into the piece, the audience realizes with a shock that the four (Cynthia Bueschel, Aleta Hayes, Stephanie McKay, and Stephen Nunley) are also, in a sense, virtual. Together they represent the mind of a girl we never see, a girl who's paralyzed and slipping in and out of coma. The puppet becomes their flimsy surrogate for wholeness.

How do we know this? Taped voices clue us in: parents calling "Cara" over and over with the kind of patience that keeps desperation at bay. Can she open her eyes? Can she just blink *once*? The deeper meanings, however, emerge with stunning force from how Comfort juxtaposes words with actions. Audiences are used to appreciating Comfort as a canny political satirist, chortling over her gender skewing in *S/he* and the all too timely shenanigans of her savvy and hilarious 1996 election-year *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous* (it opened her P.S. 122 program). In *Underground River*, she puts to more delicate, sober uses her gift for the telling incongruity, for images that, brushed together, ignite thought.

What might officially be labeled dancing in this work is not the most expressive element. The performers' sweet, wordless singing in harmony more potently establishes their identity as parts of a whole. But taken together, their actions movingly reaffirm dance's power to reveal enigmas and undercurrents. The four gently collaborate on making the puppet dance, but they cannot put "Cara"

back together again. When a female doctor's voice urges the gradually more conscious patient to blink or to squeeze her hand, the dancers exhaust themselves rushing into complicated group positions. ("Do you want to try that again, Cara?" coos the doctor. "No!" they chorus. And "No way.") You feel in your gut just how much effort the dying child must summon up to accomplish that one blink, that one squeeze.

Because she is losing her will to live. Folded white papers for a symbol-recognition test become birds for the four to make fly. They lay the tiny puppet-Cara down to sleep. And, as the increasingly desperate voices blur and fade, they circle, dancing.

It's a testament to Comfort's conception and directorial skills and to the sensitivity of the four performers that the piece, despite its subject and urgent text, never becomes maudlin. The aspects of Cara's sundered brain—even, perhaps, her "soul"—work together like game and imaginative colleagues attempting a herculean task whose goal they cannot understand. ▮



Aleta Hayes, Cynthia Bueschel, Stephen Nunley, and Stephanie McKay give life to Basil Twist's

FEBRUARY 18-24, 1998

VOICE  
the Village



Jane Comfort's America  
by  
Suzanne Carbonneau

*"Art that cannot shape society and therefore also cannot penetrate the heart...is no art."*—  
Joseph Beuys, 1985

When the shamanic artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) declared in the 1970s that we are living in a time when performers have become politicians and politicians have become performers, it seemed that Beuys was identifying one of those cyclic moments in history that would soon give way. But here we are, twenty-five years on, and, if anything, the state of affairs Beuys described has deepened. Indeed, the idea that politicians have only slipped further into their actors' masks was the subject of the late Arthur Miller in *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Jefferson Lecture, which the esteemed playwright delivered shortly after George W. Bush's 2001 inauguration. ("We are ruled more by the arts of performance, by acting in other words, than anybody wants to think about for very long," Miller excoriated official Washington.) But just as politicians have adopted the inauthenticity of acting and a grasping for celebrity as substitutes for a genuine commitment to public service, artists of all kinds have stepped into the breach to assume the mantle of community leaders, as activists and social critics.

Choreographer Jane Comfort entered the art world just as Beuys was making his prescient pronouncement, and her development has been representative of socially conscious artists of the past quarter century. It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism has re-introduced "content" to the work of artists during that time, and certainly the zeitgeist is not to be denied. But the galvanizing force for the radicalization of art was certainly the Reagan Revolution, a phenomenon that dogged Comfort's first steps as a choreographer. As Reagan's election in 1980 began the inexorable dismantling of the social safety net that had been a profound force for equity in this country since the 1930s, as it mandated an about-face on the gains for social justice that had been achieved by minority populations, and as it declared a war on culture and art in response to the pluralism of cultural diversity, the radical nature of this political convulsion and its disastrous implications for a compassionate and open society were immediately apparent. Artists did indeed step in and assumed for themselves those roles a "streamlined" government had abrogated: as caretakers and healers of the distressed, the less fortunate, the ill, and the forgotten, and as spokespeople for democratic and pluralistic ideals. In response, artists became outraged and articulate critics of social and political policies that were aggravating inequality. They were also moved to action by the homophobic response to AIDS—it took Reagan seven years to publicly utter the word—an illness that was taking a disproportionate toll on the artistic community.

With her socially conscious artmaking, Jane Comfort has been on the front lines in all of these areas of dissent. In her work, 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. Even at its wittiest, Comfort's work is a serious examination of those things that unite us as well as those things that separate us, and how we can reconcile those states of being.

Jane Comfort's America is a true cross-section of this country. Unlike the fuzzily idealized images of *Leave It to Beaver* small-town America that dominate our political conventions and discourse, her work is inhabited by an infinitely diverse conglomeration: by Southern good old boys and by transvestite prostitute drug addicts, by superheroes and strippers, by congressmen and DJs, by drag kings and Southern belles, by society decorators and rapists, by hard-charging businessmen and struggling artists, and by people of every color, sexual orientation, and gender. In showing America unvarnished and gloriously mongrel, Comfort wrests from politicians the idea of just what an American—and certainly, what an American hero—is. In viewing those outside the mainstream as individuals rather than as stereotypes, Comfort's work acknowledges that America's strength lies in its diversity and that a compassionate view toward those unlike ourselves is the true basis of America's greatness.

In developing a form to contain these statements about breaching barriers of race, class, gender, and culture, Comfort has developed a new mode of performance whose structure is consonant with this content. Comfort has always been a “low walls” artist, dismissing disciplinary boundaries in form as she crosses cultural borders in her themes. Her work is an amalgam of dance, theater, language, sound, music, visual arts, storytelling, puppetry, gesture, and poetry.

This borderless state began very early in Comfort's career with her embrace of text. She calls language “the defining thing” in her work, and not only was she using text long before it became commonplace for choreographers to do so, but her sophistication in experimenting with the various ways that textual and gestural forms can intersect has kept her far ahead of the curve. From her initial forays of using language as a “melodic line” in accompaniment to movement, she has moved on to explore classic performance texts in movement terms, to write her own theater pieces, and to collaborate with poets, playwrights, and lyricists. Always, however, language exists in service to the idea of how it is a force for understanding and shaping human consciousness. And in her more recent work, often the language has been reduced to an isolated sound or word, employed as a disruption of silence, to achieve maximum resonance.

Over the last fifteen or so years of dancemaking, Comfort has aimed for the marriage of structure and meaning, and she has created a series of deeply reverberating works of political bite and poetic subtlety. Her breakthrough in extended form came in *Department*, her two-part examination of racial bigotry. A native Tennessean, Comfort used *Department: South* (1990) to expose the ugliness that lurks just under the surface of Southern politeness and gentility. She credits fellow Southerner Mark Dendy, who performed in this work, with giving her the courage not only to expose this offensiveness but also to view its perpetrators with compassion. It was Mark Russell, then-curator of P.S. 122, who encouraged her to look at the more subtle but equally destructive manifestations of Northern bigotry in *Department: North* (1991), which turned Comfort's attention to homophobia and misogyny, in addition to race.

Another breakthrough of a different sort came in Comfort's 1993 *Faith Healing*, a movement reconception of Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie*. In *Faith Healing*, Comfort created textual movement and gestural language to create a hybrid form of dance theater that was more than the sum of those two elements. While Comfort turned to a classic American drama for the underpinning story, she deconstructed Williams's plot and dialogue to excavate themes and ideas, such as homoeroticism and the sexual fantasies of person with a disability, that Williams could not make explicit in 1944. In casting Dendy as Williams's *monstre sacre* Amanda Wingfield, Comfort also explored in earnest the gender bending that

she had begun to examine in *Department*, and that was to become a preoccupation culminating in her next work.

*S/he* (1995) was an essay in gender behavior that incorporated Comfort's research into cross-dressing. Comfort developed a drag-king alter-ego, Jack Daniels, "a Charlie Manson wannabee from the trailer park." In her forays around New York as Daniels, Comfort became acutely aware of differences in male and female movement behavior and their attendant privilege and oppression. The work was also an enraged response to the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, in which congressmen treated respected legal scholar Hill as an hysterical fantasizer, barraging her with sexist and racist insinuations concerning her dating history, her sexual proclivities, and her psychological stability. Comfort transformed the hearing transcripts into passages for a gospel choir, and added text that highlighted the racial ugliness that drove the hearings. Her next work, *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous* (1996), was also an angry response to official malfeasance, this time to the havoc wreaked by the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress and the hijacking of the national social agenda by the radical far right in its war on the poor and on artists. As she had with *S/he*, Comfort had only to let politicians—Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole, Bill Clinton, and Pat Robertson—supply a text that was more satirical than any scriptwriter could have invented.

Comfort's recent work finds the political in the personal, as it focuses on how social attitudes and conditions create the contexts for our lives. *Underground River* (1998) is a poetic exploration of the world of the disabled and, by metaphorical implication, of the creative mind. Still, even in its psychological delicacy, it is not so far from the broad lampooning of *Three Bagatelles*; for in its defense of the special insight achieved by the artist there is an answer to those right-wing politicians who characterize the federal government's presence in the arts as aid to social parasites. In Comfort's canon, *Persephone* (2004), based on the Greek myth, seems even more at odds, on its surface closer in spirit to Martha Graham's Jungian explorations than to Comfort's customary socially-activist work. Yet, here again, we see an artist exploring forms and ideas that give resonant voice to our contemporary nightmares. That this involves mining the ancient Western heritage for source material is really no contradiction at all, as what Comfort finds in *Persephone*'s story is a guidebook for learning to survive profound psychological and social upheaval.

In her activist stance, Comfort conceives of "Art as a Verb" (to use the title of a 1989 show of politically conscious art mounted by the Studio Museum of Harlem). That is, in using every means of communication at her disposal—movement, language, visual elements, and music—Comfort brings authenticity and commitment to her voice of resistance. In engaging on the front lines of the Culture Wars over two decades, she has established her bona fides as cultural worker and cultural warrior. In simultaneously creating work of deeply metaphorical implication that is resonant with layers of meaning, Comfort also establishes her bona fides as a profound artist.

## Dance

# Comfort Zone

## Anita Hill Revenged With Realness

By Elizabeth Zimmer December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1994

An all-female Senate panel frills a white male Anita Hill and a white female Clarence Thomas. The panel's women come in all sizes, shapes, colors, and sexes, a powerful gospel chorus whose harmonies bring the house down. A lounge singer croons, "He's Having My Baby" to a hugely pregnant guy in a business suit. Jane Comfort's *S/He* exploits gender and racial reversals, offering up the Hill-Thomas hearings, among other hot gender topics, in the radically altered context of a multiracial variety show. The timeliness of her subjects is underscored by the fact that two big-budget movies on similar themes, *Junior* and *Disclosure*, and a couple of books reexamining the Clarence Thomas confirmation, snuck into town just ahead of her local premiere.

Comfort is one of the most original choreographers in the downtown scene. *S/He*, which opens the 1995 Altogether Different Series at the Joyce Theater January 3, debuted in Pennsylvania in September. Its New York premiere was postponed so she could sign onto the Sondheim-Lapine musical *Passion*. As she worked in the relative affluence of Broadway, she simultaneously rehearsed her own company, buffing the Hill-Thomas material and issues from her own life into a canny political spectacle.

"The Anita Hill hearing was such an infuriating experience." I remember heading to Vermont on this little two-lane highway and telling my husband if he didn't turn off the radio I was going to drive off the road. And he said, 'Jane, it's very important.' I was so upset. I'm intrigued with the reverse harassment charges, which, with Michael Crichton's book, are here, in the country, right now."

Comfort went looking for raw material at the Museum of Television & Radio. "It was amazing how little they had. But I got to watch the hearings again. The Anita Hill thing kicked in for so many women. These men are up there abusing this woman and getting away with it. 'Are you a scorned woman, Miss Hill? Do you have sexual fantasies about your coworkers? Are you in touch with reality on a daily basis?' No one is going to ask a man that. We turn that testimony around."

"I knew that I wanted my panel to be African-American, and the people I liked were all singers. I had to distill the testimony for singing – there's a lot of call-and-response stuff." What Nancy Alfaro, as Clarence Thomas, and Joseph Ritsch, as Anita Hill, say in *S/He* is pretty much straight testimony, but transformation of self electrify Comfort's version of the proceedings.

Comfort is a master collaborator. Andre Shoals, a young dancer and drag artist in *S/He*, suggested some transformations of the text; she was happy to adopt them. "He said we should ask Joseph all this really ridiculous 'white' stuff, like 'Do you have any Donny and Marie Osmond albums, Mr. Hill? Do you eat Velveeta Cheese? Did you ever receive an L.L Bean catalogue?' In Anita Hill's case, would all those details have been aired publicly if the protagonists had been white? That's a subtext coming to the surface." She also owes a lot to Alfaro who's been with her for nine years and has played shy, repressed female characters. "In *S/He*, she's doing the exact opposite, in spades," says Comfort, who has cast her as the oppressor in several different guises, including that of a manipulative woman.

Striding around a rehearsal studio in black tights and boots and a short black skirt, her hair alive with light, Comfort resembles a fashion editor or the manager of a chic boutique. But she's a trickster. A photo of her in her Jack Daniel's character – "this weeny little guy, a Charlie Manson

wannabe from the trailer park” – adorns the December page in the 1994 Drag King Calendar. In drag on video, she’s managed to fool even her own company.

Comfort got involved in drag because it was a preoccupation with her dancers, and because it’s an intrinsic part of the environment of the city. “When my 11-year-old niece came for a visit, I drove her all around. We went down Ninth Avenue, and she saw these transvestites on the street. And she was transfixed and horrified, but that’s what she remembers about New York more than anything.”

While developing her 1991 *Department*, which explored bigotry and the dislocations felt by a young Southern girl (played by Alfaro) seeking a career as a singer in New York, she met Shoals, whose drag name is Afrodite. Shoals lured Mark Dendy, a former member of Comfort’s ensemble, into drag work. “Mark evolved an identity as Sandy Sheets, a female televangelist in recovery. And my intern was involved with drag. I was surrounded by it, going to their shows. I wanted to deal with reverse gender, but not from a gay viewpoint – that work’s being done all the time. More as a feminist social commentary.”

In January 1993, Comfort took Diane Torr’s drag-king workshop, a regular offering whose graduates reverberate throughout the Downtown community. (Torr’s own company brings *Drag Kings and Subjects* to P.S. 122 in February). Comfort came to Torr’s workshop with an identity in mind and a costume. “A female-to-male transvestite made us up as men. Then we spent seven hours working with Diane on how men sit, and their use of space – huge! Diane was fascinating, the way she would pick up a grape, doing it just the way a guy would, or hold up a glass.”

One night, as Jack Daniels, Comfort escorted Shoals as Afrodite to a club, USA, where Shoals was performing. “I was really nervous, because I don’t have a voice. With Diane, I was in a big group, but at USA I was going to have to take a taxi home alone at night – a reason I took a Southern character is because so many Southern men have high voices. I was scared to get in a cab and use my voice. But I went with Afrodite and these guys, and we got in the VIP elevator. There was a woman running it whom I’ve seen in ballet class. And she surveys us all and goes by me just like that. I realized she didn’t know who I was. I went, ‘Damn!’ And the whole night I passed!”

She stands up, swaggers to the side of the room, and folds her arms. “I spent the night leaning up against the wall. Afrodite brought me drinks so I didn’t have to order. Nobody approached me the entire time. You know, you could never do this as a woman. And I’m watching all these guys leaning up against the wall, just like this. Moving nothing. And of course the drag queens are dancing all over the place, moving their bodies. It’s fascinating. There’s still a core male me that I’m trying to get to know.”

“In on section of *S/He*, we go through male/female sitting behavior. And then we get out of our chairs and take standing gender poses, forms of boxing and flamenco port de bras. I find it utterly fascinating, trying to be a guy around Andre, who’s this gorgeous, six-foot-tall black woman. I’ve had a very hard time – he’s so perfect as a woman, he’s beautiful, he’s not exaggerated. And he’s really tried to help me. He’s constantly taking movement away from me, because men don’t move very much. So the music is playing and I’m like, doing my leg, and he says, don’t move your leg.” Comfort’s life has evolved since her Tennessee childhood. She’s the wife of a banker, lives in an airy, dramatically proportioned TriBeca loft with two kids (Clair, nine, and Gardiner, 14), and visits topless bars in male drag in order to fully understand the difference between male and female use of space. She lunges around her studio, spreading her legs wide to show how men fill a room, applying her “drag king” experience.

“If confronted, a male would never drop his gaze. Women – especially if you’re from the South, you drop your gaze, you nod your head, you agree, you’re always going, ‘uh-huh, uh-huh.’” Comfort demonstrates, perhaps unconsciously, one hand clutched between her knees.”

“I’m a Southern girl. The girl stuff is even more exaggerated if you’re raised in the South. I mean, dropping the gaze is such a Southern thing, some kind of deference to power. Men never do it. And boys learn early on.”

Twenty years ago, studying painting at UNC-Chapel Hill, Comfort saw Merce Cunningham’s company and decided she’d rather perform. Trained in both visual arts and dance, she’s been choreographing since 1978, choosing themes that consistently place her ahead of the curve. Last year’s tour de force, *Faith Healing*, embroiders the text of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*. Its winning and original aspect was largely her over-the-top choreography of the psychic subtext she created for Williams’ characters, evoking a visual, physical manifestation of the text. Her work, which included the Gentleman Caller on roller skates giving Alfaro’s Laura the ride of her life, so



impressed a Lincoln Center staffer that he urged James Lapine to offer the post of associate director on *Passion*.

Comfort is the first Downtown artist in some years- and one of very few young mothers – to wind up on the creative team for a Broadway musical. There are similarities between the Italian story she helped Sondheim bring to the stage and the Tennessee Williams script she plumbed last year: both feature suppressed, smoldering women. *Passion's* Fosca, a character not unlike *Menagerie's* Laura, also has a gentleman caller. Comfort remembers the *Passion* experience for what it taught her about doing creative work in the highly scheduled, unionized environment of Broadway theater, where there's no time for unprofessional behavior. "Five-minute breaks were monitored with a stopwatch. When you're working with actors and want to set something in a last run-through...the clock stops exactly at six."

Comfort has learned a great deal about the comparative economics of Downtown versus mainstream theater. She recently received a \$20,000 two-year NEA grant. Her company's annual budget, still in five figures, is about a third as big as those of other choreographers in her range. "A lot of people have said, 'How fabulous, now you can move into commercial theater and make a lot of money. And I'd love to work on Broadway again, because my experience with James and Steve was so great. But I have no intention of shifting careers. I love my company and I love what I do. I just hope there will be enough money to keep on doing it.'"

Comfort's husband is, like her, a Southerner, from High Point, North Carolina. "It's just hard, you know, with two children and both of our careers. John travels a lot to Latin America. But I rehearse at home. My kids are learning firsthand that women run things. I want them to come see the performances, to see the whole process. They'll see why Mom's so tired. Why Mom has to take a nap every day at about 5:30 before they get their dinner. They see the rehearsal, the costumes all over the house; they know the dancers, they have a relationship with them. They see me on the phone and on the computer, late at night, working on the business side of it. See me getting crazy as the show comes up closer. They saw *Faith Healing*, and *Passion*, too. So they understand why Mom wasn't home all this time. They can see the whole cycle."

A Downtown choreographer may work with limited resources, but as director of her own company, Comfort makes the plans and sets the schedules. As associate director on a Broadway show, however, she had to adapt to a schedule much more demanding than anything she's ever faced. John had some trouble getting used to the reality of that situation.

"I told him what the rehearsal hours were. I said, 'It's almost like I'm going to be on tour. I'll be home in the mornings, but then I won't be there at night.' And I don't think he wanted to know. My husband is incredibly supportive and kind; he cooks, he's totally involved with the children's welfare...but he's, he's well, what can I say? He's very traditional. He has this fantasy, like a lot of men have, that, even though he's married to an artist – I mean, most traditional men aren't married to artists – that even though I am physically active all day long, rehearsing, somehow when he comes home the kids are going to be fed, and I'm going to be standing there at the stove with the bubbling soup, in a good mood.

"That's another thing I put into *S/He* – the man rushes in with his briefcase and the kids jump all over him. And he has to deal with the baby-sitter problem, and the childcare, you know, all that stuff. And then the woman walks in and says, 'Hi honey, what's for dinner?'"

The Altogether Different audiences at the Joyce will find a dance theater piece that stretches the medium, that is at once politically astute and very funny, that casts Anita Hill's inquisitors as a bunch of high-heeled, many-hued bitches with attitude. The conviction behind that attitude has been, for the choreographer, hard won, and developed in some very strange places.

"The hardest part of Diane's workshop was our night at Billy's Topless – some woman locked eyes with me, because we were giving them dollars, and she started gyrating for me and spreading her legs and looking me right in the eye. I wanted to drop my gaze and run screaming out of that bar. It was so difficult. I said to myself, you will not drop your gaze, you will look at her like a male, you are going to run your eyes up and down her body as if you own it, and you are going to maintain eye contact as if you own her. And I was dying, it was so painful. I thought, boy, *that* is acting. It's like the way I'm dealing with my performers. I have all this authority, and there's a part of me going, Arghhhhh!"

JANE COMFORT

JULY 1999



**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.

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*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 *Deportment*; 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 *Deportment* 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 Alfaro, 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  
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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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