

# Step-by-step

For more than a half-century, Twyla Tharp has found success as few choreographers have. She brings her 50th anniversary tour to the Annenberg.



**Choreographer Twyla Tharp, 74,** says her success is “basically because men in the world of ballet have been big supporters.”

By Ellen Dunkel  
 INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**F**ifty years after Twyla Tharp created her first dance, the four-minute *Tank Dive*, she is among American’s most successful female choreographers, and perhaps the one whose work is most often performed.

“It’s obvious there’s an inequity there,” Tharp, 74, said by phone from the West Coast leg of her 10-week 50th anniversary tour, which comes this weekend to the Annenberg Center.

She would not comment beyond her own experience but said her success came “basically because men in the world of ballet have been big supporters, starting with Bob Joffrey. He was a fantastic guiding factor in doing the first two ballets I did.”

Each achievement begot more opportunities. “Misha [Mikhail Baryshnikov] figured he can nail solos, maybe he can do something for me, and Lucia Chase at ABT [American Ballet Theatre] figured

**DANCE**

► **Twyla Tharp 50th Anniversary Tour**

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St.

**Tickets:** \$30-\$75.

**Information:**

215-898-3900 or annenberg center.org.

he wanted it. Paris Opera asked me to make a piece for them. Anthony Dowell asked me to work with his dancers” at the Royal Ballet.

“The men have appreciated that I can make dance for men in a way that hasn’t been done before. It’s physical; I was a very good jumper. I did a lot of weight training, which helped with partnering. I understand leverage. Many women might find it difficult, but I put myself in that position. To some degree, I studied that world. These are the tools you need, go and get them. It’s about being competitive. If you want to do it, you do study it.

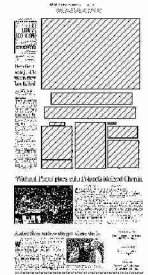
See **THARP** on C3

What are the resources I need here? Do I stack up?”

Yet, even in that first performance in 1965 at Hunter College, *Tank Dive* spoke to the unlikely likelihood that she’d succeed.

As her website explains, “The title *Tank Dive* reflects Tharp’s belief that becoming a successful choreographer is equivalent to the chances of successfully diving into a thimbleful of water from a great height.”

Yet over a half-century, she has found success — and visibility — as have few others: 129 dances, 12 TV specials, six Hollywood movies, four full-length



ballets, four Broadway shows, two figure-skating routines, a Tony Award, two Emmys, a MacArthur Fellowship — the honors go on and on. She has written three books; a fourth is in the works.

Even those less familiar with dance may recognize her name from the movie *Hair* and the Broadway show *Movin' Out*.

All this has earned her a loyal group of elite dancers who form the latest iteration of a company she has several times formed and folded.

"The reality is that this group of dancers is a group of dancers I've been working with for a very long time. Several have been in all three [recent] Broadway shows or have done the works I've made in other companies. We don't really audition. In a way, dancers come to us. I go out of my way to work as hard as I can to use specific dancers. Dancers appreciate this."

Their tour features two new pieces, *Preludes and Fugues* and *Yowzie*. Tharp describes *Preludes and Fugues* as "the world as it ought to be."

It is set to Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which, not coincidentally, shares initials with the World Trade Center.

"In 2001, my company had been the last to perform at the World Trade Center's outdoor plaza," Tharp wrote on a blog post in the New York Times. "We danced on Saturday night, Sunday was dark, and Monday night's show was rained out. The attack was Tuesday morning."

*Yowzie* is "the world as it is," Tharp writes, full of messy, imperfect people, set to a jazz

compilation.

Tharp has said she prefers not to harp on the past, but to move forward. But *Preludes and Fugues* offers nods to influential choreographers: Merce Cunningham, Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham, and George Balanchine, while in *Yowzie*, she quotes her 1971 piece *Eight Jelly Rolls*.

"I see [the past] as a launching pad," Tharp said. "It's a 50th anniversary work. I'm holding on to the past while reaching to the future."

She's on tour with the dancers for the run. "It's a privilege to watch the shows. I enjoy doing the rehearsals. It's good to be traveling with them, sharing things with them."

But she has also already planned for the future, choreographing a bit of work that's not included in the tour, to ensure there's something for the dancers to work on later. The plan is that the new work will tour next year. "Joined by several new pieces," she said. "New work, of course — that's what I do."

How much has the dance world changed in 50 years?

"Not so much," Tharp said. "It was never easy. When we started working in the '60s, there was no federal funding. It's never been easy. In the arts, it's just not. And it's not going to be. It takes vision, commitment, and self-insistence in order to pursue an artistic endeavor."

"It's very, very romantic to see it any other way."

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**Twyla Tharp dancers** Ron Todorowski (left), Amy Ruggiero, and John Selya in costume for her new "Yowzie." RUVEN AFANADOR



**Twyla Tharp dancers** (from left) Daniel Baker, Ramona Kelley, Nicholas Coppula, and Eva Trapp-Coppula in Bach costumes for the choreographer's new piece "Preludes and Fugues," included in her 50th anniversary tour, coming to the Annenberg Center. RUVEN AFANADOR



**Dancers** Matthew Dibble and Rika Okamoto in costume for "Yowzie," the other new piece, which Tharp describes as "the world as it is." "Preludes and Fugues," she says, is "the world as it ought to be."