

# Lark in the Park

# dance

## How Ballet Tech Spends Summer Vacation

BY THOMAS  
DEFRANTZ

**A**s a teenager in 1957, Eliot Feld danced in the Broadway production of *West Side Story*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins. Exactly 40 years later, he's leading six young protégés, trained at his Manhattan-based Ballet Tech, onto the boards of Central Park's Delacorte Theater in a new production of Betty Comden and Adolph Green's *On the Town*, directed by George C. Wolfe. (Robbins choreographed the 1944 original, based on his ballet *Fancy Free*; the show's composer was Leonard Bernstein.)

Feld canceled his company's season at the Joyce to devise choreography for *On the Town*, which begins performances July 31. The dancers tell what's got them spunked about working in a summertime musical:

Rachel Alvarado, 18: "I've been training at the school since I was eight, and a musical theater buff since I was out of the womb, thanks to my mother. Just being a part of it is an amazing thing for me: the opportunity to work with these two great directors, Eliot and George, and to do something I've always dreamed of doing. A great part is the 'Rajah Bimmy' scene, where I have to be a wench—a new thing for me."

Nickemil Concepcion, 18, four years at Ballet Tech: "I like to act and sing and dance in one production—the energy of it all when it comes together. Eliot expects what he wants done right then and there—and he wants you to be flexible enough to change whatever he wants to change—even if you've learned the whole sequence—right then and there."

Darren Gibson, 27: "I've been with Eliot since I was 10; I'm the first professional product of his school. My favorite part is the 'Do-Re-Do' number—even though I'm not in it. It's sexy and fun. I've done sexy before but not in that blatant way. It's opposite from being a ballet dancer. From the time you come on stage in a ballet, you tell the story through your body. In a musical, the story is being said with words, and there's a buildup to the dance. In some sense that takes a burden off of you. You just have to go out there and give 100 per cent."

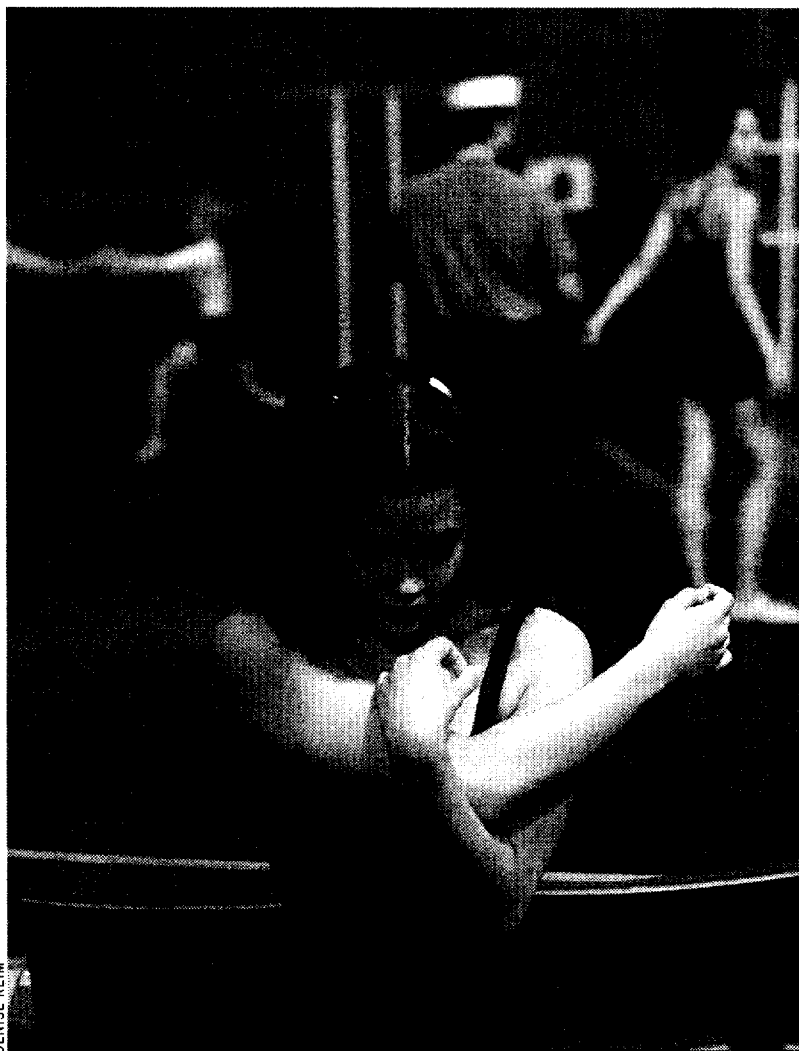
Jassen Virolas, 17, nine years at Ballet Tech: "I've never done a musical show before. I love it. When we first started rehearsing it was more dancing. Now I see I have to give a little acting, and the singers make me want to take singing lessons. I love the 'Coney Island Dream Ballet'—I just feel like I could dance it, that it's for me."

Patricia Tuthill, 18, eight years at Ballet Tech: "The 'Times Square' dance is exciting to do—a lot of good partnering. I love dancing the 'Lonely Town' pas de deux with Jassen—it's great to feel pretty. But I definitely miss that we're not having a season of our own. I'm not regretting it; it's nice to work with different kinds of people and be incorporated into something bigger."

Margaux Zadikian, 19, 10 years at Ballet Tech: "I can't wait to perform in Central Park. It will be more . . . natural, I guess. I like the 'Primitive Dance'—it's fun to just go crazy. I'm

wondering how the costume changes and crossovers are gonna work out, but somehow they always do."

Sophia Salguero, 25, isn't a Feld dancer, but she plays Ivy Smith, the leading role that brought Japanese American ballerina Sono Osato accolades in 1944: "I studied at Connecticut Ballet and then Boston Ballet for about two years. Then I took time off, and concentrated on acting and singing. It's amazing to be dancing this much onstage again; it's a godsend. Ivy's a wonderful character, and I understood her right away. I've been in New York about two years now, but I still feel like her, like maybe I don't fit in, that I'm a little too open, that everyone else has their great facade that they can put on when they're walking down the street that she doesn't have. She's full of life and desire and drive, and she wants so much for her dream to come true. I identify with her. And the woman who originated this role was half American and half foreign just like me—my mother is American, my father is from Guatemala. In rehearsal, George told us that Osato's Japanese father was in an internment camp when the show opened on Broadway. Where will my mom be on opening night? Probably in the front row." ❖



Open (musical) theater: *On the Town's* Sophia Salguero and Ballet Tech

## ¿Qué Pasa, Kielbasa?

**W**aiting outside the theater in this sooty hub of Polish industry, I catch someone's eye. Is that a kielbasa in his pocket, or is he just happy to be here, among the excited crowd at Bytom's fourth Contemporary Dance Festival?

As their country awakes from the double nightmare of Nazi and Soviet occupation, Poles are discovering that contemporary dance is hot, and available. McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut already compete incongruously on the dusty, cobblestone streets downtown. Organized by local choreographer Jacek Luminski (who has researched the vestiges of Jewish folk culture in postwar Poland) and his American sidekick, Catherine Peila, the festival is bringing highbrow modern culture to an old coal town, whose cultural scene, until quite recently, was controlled from Moscow. Upper Silesia will never be the same.

The 10-day festival, funded primarily by foundations, corporations, and foreign embassies, is practically the only manifestation of modern dance in Poland. Western Europe sent the most exciting performers. Switzerland's Compagnie Philippe Saire combined the symbolic images of German *tanztheater* with a typical Gallic attitude toward

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life. Their piece, *Small Natural Disasters*, employed a slick, fluid movement style to wink at the vagaries of a ménage à trois. A truly amazing duo from Holland, Diane Elshout and Frank Händeler, provided nonstop action and spectacular partnering in two duets, derived from improvisation, during which the dancers grappled with everything they've got, using their feet, arms, and torsos as connecting links and levers. They've only been choreographing together for 18 months, and displayed two-thirds of their entire oeuvre.

Finnish powerhouse Tero Saarinen, now the master of his own Company Toothpick, offered a series of intriguing solos, plus *Westward HO*, a trio (to music by Gavin Bryars, Moondog, and Art Zoyd) that illustrated the transition from '70s minimalism to today's revived interest in emotion, shattering its unison to explore a variety of relationships. America's major contribution

was the José Limón Company, invigorated by an infusion of young talent, and heartbreaking in Limón's 1958 *Mazurkas*, inspired by the choreographer's trip to composer Chopin's native land. The Poles themselves no longer dance mazurkas, which were perceived by the Soviets as a lightning rod for nationalism.

After nightly performances, audiences retired to the theater bar, where artists answered questions about their work. The inspired physicality of the dancers, combined with beer and shots of the local potato juice, made for intense discussion. Most of the participants would burn off their hangovers in dance workshops the next day. John Brooks, Ellen Cornfield, Louise Klöxüll, Tony Morales, and Robin Stiehm taught Cunningham, Graham, Horton, and other techniques to eager locals, and the South African Jackie Mbuyiselwa Semala, artistic director of Soweto Dance Theatre, led throngs in elegant Zulu hunting moves.

The conference drew participants from across Poland, and journalists from Germany, the Baltics, and the U.S. The newest member of NATO, Poland's shaping up as a new frontier for contemporary dance. ❖

## Zen Dancing

**T**he first sounds in Joseph Celli's score for *Paramitta II* (Kaye Playhouse, July 8 and 9) are low, grumbling reverberations that fill the gut and linger in the ear. They serve as temple gongs, calling the dancers of the Sun Mu Ga Zen Dance Company to seated lotus postures onstage and drawing the musicians of the Hanulsori ensemble and the chanter (choreographer Sun Ock Lee) ceremoniously up the aisles.

In Buddhist theology, the *Paramittas* are the six virtues: right generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and wisdom. Lee and Celli have collaborated to provide a section of music and dancing to illustrate each of the six, combining a modern dance vocabulary with the traditional mudras of Korean Buddhist ritual and taped and live sounds with traditional instruments. The result is less a concert event than an opportunity to witness a sacred moment of arcane power.

Lee uses a limited palette of leg gestures and traveling steps which the dancers layer under liquid, ornate hand positions and serpentine arm coilings. The ensuing improvisatory composition often resembles a kind of competition on the stage, with the lone male figure usually separate from the four females. The performers' absorption in their activity impresses in its serenity, even when the dancing reaches sweaty heights. The musicians are frequently visible behind an upstage scrim, and add a captivating movement interest, particularly when splashing in transparent, amplified cauldrons of water.

Buddhism in Korea has been syncretic and resilient since it migrated from China in the fourth or fifth century of the Common Era. This malleable performance approach might then accurately reflect a uniquely Korean understanding. When wisdom, the final *Paramitta*, arrives, it is with enough shrieking to burst a cochlea. As the section ends, golden cymbals, with which the dancers had been adding to the din, rise on wires into a cloud-spattered sky. The dancers come forward and bow—to us, to each other, and to their inner sense of ceremony. —CHRIS DOHSE