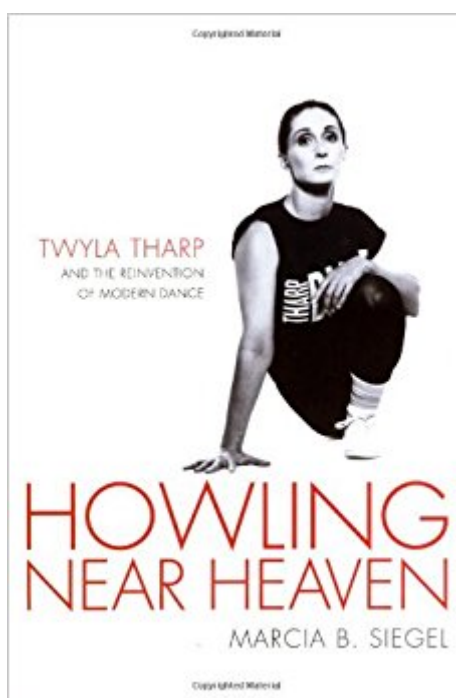


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Howling Near Heaven: Twyla Tharp And The Reinvention Of Modern Dance



Synopsis

For more than four decades, Twyla Tharp has been a phenomenon in American dance, a choreographer who not only broke the rules but refused to repeat her own successes. At the conclusion of *Howling Near Heaven*, Marcia Siegel writes about the thrill of watching Tharp choreograph in 1991: "Tharp's movement can be planned or spontaneous, personal, funny, hard as hell, precise enough to look thrown away. She doesn't so much invent or create it, she prepares for it. Crusty, driven, demanding, and admiring, she hurls challenges at the dancers. Brave, virtuosic, and cheerful, they volley back what she gives them and more. She watches them. They watch her. It's the most subtle form of competition and cooperation, a process so intuitive, so intimate, that no one can say whose dance it is in the end, and none of the parties to that dance can be removed without endangering its identity. The same is true for all theatrical dance making, all over the world, only most of it isn't so inspired or obsessed." Starting in the rebellious 1960s, Tharp tried her creative wings on minimalism, pedestrianism, and Dada, then abandoned both the avant-garde and the established modern dance. She thrilled a new audience with her witty version of jazz in *Eight Jelly Rolls*, then merged her dancers with the Joffrey Ballet for the sensational *Deuce Coupe*, to the music of the Beach Boys. She explored the classical world in *Push Comes to Shove*, for the American Ballet Theater and the celebrated Russian virtuoso Mikhail Baryshnikov. For her touring company in the 1970s and 1980s, an unprecedented fusion of modern dancers and ballet dancers, she created a superb repertory that included the theatrical full-length work *The Catherine Wheel*, the ballroom duets *Nine Sinatra Songs*, and the company showcase *Baker's Dozen*. Tharp has made movies, television specials, and nearly one hundred riveting dance works. *Movin' Out*, the dance show that reflected on the Vietnam era using the music of Billy Joel, ran on Broadway for three years and won Tharp a Tony award for Best Choreography. *Howling Near Heaven* is the first in-depth study of Twyla Tharp's unique, restless creativity, the story of a choreographer who refused to be pigeonholed and the dancers who accompanied her as she sped across the frontiers of dance.

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Customer Reviews

Twyla Tharp is one of the most highly regarded choreographers working today; she reinvented modern dance by marrying it to jazz and classical ballet in her own witty, athletic, musically sophisticated style. Veteran dance critic Siegel (*The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance*) offers an in-depth look at Tharp's work, placing it in a historical, social, cultural, political and artistic context. Tharp began inventing her choreographic approach in the '60s, winning over audiences at the avant-garde Judson Church with *Eight Jelly Rolls*. She then conquered the ballet world with *Deuce Coupe* for the Joffrey Ballet and *Push Comes to Shove* for American Ballet Theatre. She has gone on to create an enduring repertoire as well as a Broadway hit, *Movin' Out*, with Billy Joel. Siegel provides a wealth of insight into the choreographer's groundbreaking movement vocabulary and its development over four decades. Siegel quotes extensively from dance critics, including Arlene Croce and Deborah Jowitt. While these quotes and Siegel's own spare, tight observations are illuminating, there's little "howling" to be heard. The book could have used more from the "crusty, driven, demanding" choreographer herself. Still, this is a thoughtful record of Tharp's oeuvre and a must for theater and dance scholars and aficionados. (Mar.)
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Dance critic Siegel and choreographer Twyla Tharp embarked on their respective artistic adventures at the same time. Now the award-winning critic provides an expert and suitably awe-inspiring dance-by-dance chronicle of the trailblazing choreographer's unstoppable creativity and phenomenal vitality. Siegel begins with a succinct and clarifying history of modern dance up to 1965 when Tharp, "at once a rebel and a puritan," began her aesthetic revolution. Siegel crisply characterizes Tharp's unique "dance intelligence" and "compositional preoccupations," as well her driving ambition, "boiling intensity," and notorious obdurateness. Cerebral and sensual, comic and rigorous, formal and nonchalant, Tharp brilliantly combines classical dance with everyday movement, and infuses her work with energy and emotion by using songs by the Beach Boys,

Frank Sinatra, David Byrne, and, most recently, Billy Joel. Siegel analyzes each work as well as Tharp's critical reception, her struggles to maintain her dance company, her forays into television and film, and her myriad personal and professional heartaches and triumphs. Demanding, daring, and controversial, Tharp has greatly enlarged the audience for dance, and summoned forth pure ecstasy. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I found this book to be quite interesting, but I don't think that this is just for any person to read. If you are a Twyla person and/or a dance person then this is the book for you. Just be patient when reading it.

As someone who respects Twyla Tharp's career, but who doesn't necessarily revel in all her works, I approached Marcia Siegel's chronicle a little cautiously. What I found, however, is a sensational movement-based refresher course on Tharp's original contributions to contemporary dance. Context, references, and relevant anecdotes from former dancers are terrific. It not only gave me a new appreciation of Tharp, but I wanted to immediately start re-reviewing all Tharp's works on stage or at least on video.

I love Twyla Tharp, so I bought this book as soon as I saw it. Unfortunately, even for a hardcore fan, this book is impossibly boring. Very detailed and highly researched, yes. Interesting or insightful, no. Don't bother.

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