

For a vintage theater, a vintage Choreographer

By GIA KOURLAS

AT 61, the prolific Lucinda Childs is like a black cocktail dress. She never goes out of style.

Sure, the way she melds rigorous structure with repetitive balletic movement risks translating into pleasing but perfunctory dance — easy on the eyes and just as easily forgotten. But her minimalist body of work is neither.

From her early Judson Dance Theater experiments like “Carnation,” in which she illustrated the plight of the housewife by stuffing sponges in her mouth and wearing a colander on her head, to her pure, non-narrative ballets, Ms. Childs remains fresh.

It is no surprise that Dean Moss, dance and performance curator of the Kitchen, found Ms. Childs to be the perfect artist to represent the Chelsea theater’s 30th anniversary season. “She embodies the aesthetic that the Kitchen came out of,” he said. “It’s so clear to me that this institution owes a great debt to and, in fact, is defined by artists like Lucinda Childs.”

To mark the occasion, the Kitchen is presenting Ms. Childs in a program of three solos on Wednesday through April 20. The retrospective features “Dance No. 4,” a section of the evening-length “Dance,” which was first performed in 1979; “Description (of a Description),” which was created for the 2000 Montpellier festival in France; and the “Underwater” solo from the opera “White Raven,” Ms. Childs’s most recent collaboration with the composer Philip Glass and the director Robert Wilson. Their first joint effort was the ground-

Lucinda Childs looks back at her long career in a retrospective to salute the Kitchen’s 30th year.

breaking 1976 opera “Einstein on the Beach.”

The idea for “Dance” arose while Ms. Childs and Mr. Glass were on tour with “Einstein.” Mr. Glass suggested that they collaborate on a dance and encouraged her to enlist the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt for the set design. At first Mr. LeWitt was resistant. Ms. Childs recalled his saying: “Your work is visually very complex. I don’t see the point.”

Ultimately Mr. LeWitt relented, creating a black-and-white film of the dancers dancing. In “Dance No. 4,” his film of Ms. Childs is projected on a white scrim, behind which she dances to Mr. Glass’s score. The dance onstage is seamlessly synchronized with the film, creating a stunning play with scale and perception.

And the story behind the work’s somewhat unremarkable name? “It was the only title the three of us could agree on,” she said.

The title is wholly appropriate to all of Ms. Childs’s choreographic endeavors: she captures the power of meticulous, unaffected dancing. Mr. Glass’s minimalist music in “Dance” is less mirrored in than illuminated by Ms. Childs’s carefully plotted movement, consisting of sliding chassés and turns that continually twist and curve. “The music and dance are both linked to structure,” Mr. Glass said. “And though they’re not identical, they share commonalities.”

Even at her most austere, as in “Dance,” Ms. Childs approaches her work with a rich sense of theater. “I wanted to be an actress before I started dancing,” she said. “Every chance I could when I was growing up in New York, I would go to see wonderful Broadway productions. What fascinated me was how the actors got inside their roles and managed to be convincing without you feeling any effort. I find that quality with the dancers I work with. They enjoy the concentration.”

Gia Kourlas is the dance editor of *Time Out New York*.



Stephanie Berger

Lucinda Childs dancing, and philosophizing on the color blue, in “Underwater,” a solo she choreographed for “White Raven,” an opera by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, at Lincoln Center Festival 2001. “I wanted to be an actress before I started dancing,” she says.

Lucinda Childs

The Kitchen

Wednesday through April 20.

The two other solos on the program further illustrate Ms. Childs’s riveting command of the stage. As the Writer in the “Underwater” solo from “White Raven,” an opera commissioned by the Portuguese government in 1998 to commemorate the country’s 15th-century maritime explorers, she philosophizes on the color blue. Elise Bernhardt, the Kitchen’s executive director, who has known Ms. Childs since the 70’s, was adamant about including the piece in the retrospective.

“I am not always a Bob Wilson fan, but I went to see ‘White Raven,’ and Lucinda stole the show,” Ms. Bernhardt said. “I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. As she talked and moved, she owned the stage.”

In the final and most recent solo, “Description (of a Description),” Ms. Childs’s movement is set to text by Susan Sontag, with a set and lighting by the German artist Hans Peter Kuhn. As the piece progresses, the audience’s view, which begins with a spotlight on Ms. Childs’s feet as she sits on a platform, grows to encompass the entire space.

“The story was taken from a diary of Nietzsche that Susan elaborated upon,” Ms. Childs said. “It’s a story within a story. There’s one straightforward action, in which a man falls down, and then other stories branch out.”

Ms. Childs, who met Ms. Sontag during the heyday of the radical Judson dance movement, felt a connection with her after reading her first book of essays, “Against Interpretation.” “Art was going in many different directions,” Ms. Childs said. “It was an exciting time, but also very confusing. I found there was a sensibility in her essays that was incredibly satisfying. Suddenly, it felt like I had my feet on the ground. You just have to keep looking — that’s how you find your way.”

While Ms. Childs has found her way in New York, where she still keeps a loft apartment, lately she spends much of her time working for ballet and opera companies in Europe. After her season at the Kitchen, she heads to Scotland and Switzerland, where she will direct an opera and choreograph a ballet, respectively. “In opera and ballet you can prepare material in advance and have all the ideas ready, which is the process I normally go through, but when you’re in rehearsal you have to be extremely open,” she said. “Not that I go into a rehearsal to improvise, but I enjoy being spontaneous whenever it’s possible.”

HER newest dance, “Chacony,” for Mikhail Baryshnikov’s White Oak Dance Project, is set to string quartets by Benjamin Britten and integrates floor work, trios and partnering (anomalies in much of Ms. Childs’s work). Its premiere will be at the Lisner Auditorium in Washington from May 3 through May 5. Last spring, in conjunction with White Oak’s “PASTForward” program, Ms. Childs’s haunting “Carnation” was revived with Emily Coates in the lead.

For Ms. Coates, a former member of the New York City Ballet, the experience was more than a notch in her dance belt. Just as Ms. Childs discovered through Ms. Sontag’s writing that you find your way by looking, with “Carnation,” Ms. Coates found her place in that gray area where dance meets performance art.

“‘Carnation’ allowed me to explore minutiae onstage,” Ms. Coates said. “I had never done a piece that had given me that opportunity. Lucinda gave me so much freedom. She’s extremely elegant through and through, and she produces elegant work — even when you have a mouthful of sponges, there’s enormous dignity. And inside her structure and formalism, there’s something extremely passionate.” □