

An Experimentalist in Soul and Body

Deborah Hay rehearsing her solo work "Voilà," which she will perform at the Kitchen—"Dance is the place where I practice attention. It's a kind of alertness in my body that I have at no other time." David Jennings for The New York Times

By ANN DALY

DEBORAH HAY, A PIONEER OF post-modern dance whose explorations started in the Judson Dance Theater movement in the early 1960's and have yet to slacken, cannot recall how she happened upon the title for her latest solo. So she utters it aloud — "Voilà" — attempting to retrieve its history. Her right hand punctuates the sound with a sudden upward flourish. "It feels so appropriate," she decides, "because it describes the work that I do. 'Here it is.' It just appears. And then it's gone. This momentariness is part of the spirit of the dance."

As with all of Ms. Hay's recent work, the spirit of "Voilà," which she will perform Thursday through next Sunday at the Kitchen, is playful. She literally gallops and prances through the 40-minute solo, enacting radical non sequiturs of material: not just eccentric, even awkward movements, but also storytelling, vocalizations (tongue clicks and guttural rumblings that never quite reach full release) and various other sorts of emotional outburst. She is, in quick succession, fierce, tentative, sorrowful, amazed, earnest, exasperated. She makes ugly faces and does silly kid's stuff. Ms. Hay is plumbing the tragic in the comic, and vice versa.

Tied to her roots in the Judson Dance Theater, an informal collective of experimentalists who rejected traditional choreography and technique in favor of open-ended scores and ordinary movement, Ms. Hay defines dance expansively. "Dance is

Since the heady days of the Judson Dance Theater, Deborah Hay hasn't stopped questioning the nature of performance.

the place where I practice attention," she says. "It's a kind of alertness in my body that I have at no other time. So dance for me is about playing awake."

Ms. Hay has lived in Austin, Tex., since 1976, after moving there from a commune in northern Vermont. At 55, she is concerned about the fate of her solo repertoire and about her reputation as an idiosyncratic performer. These concerns have led her back into territory from which she exiled herself more than three decades ago: choreography, trained performers, even dance preservation. "Whereas before I thought of choreography as what you did in order to perform," she explained, "the idea of choreography as a separate art form has suddenly become very interesting to me."

Over the years, the format of Ms. Hay's work has changed from folklike communal dances to company concerts to solos, but her deeply philosophical, even spiritual, interest in the presence of the body has never waned. Proceeding from question to question about

the nature of performance, she has extended into the 1990's a rigorous experimental agenda, with provocative results.

From 1980 to 1993, she conducted an annual four-month workshop for trained and untrained performers, as a means of developing her own solos. Each workshop explored a specific "meditation" formulated by Ms. Hay. For 1995, for example, the meditation was this: "Imagining every cell in my body at once has the potential to dialogue with all that there is." That workshop culminated in the large group dance "My Heart," which inspired "Voilà."

Because she wants to delve deeper into the possibilities of choreography, Ms. Hay has temporarily suspended the annual workshop to work with trained performers. Now she generates new pieces by quoting her previous ones. In increasingly complex ways, after "Voilà" had its premiere in Austin in November 1995, she wrote its 16-page libretto, an intricate layering of description, memoir, commentary and stage direction that slides between first- and third-person perspectives. Then she performed the libretto as a monologue, entitled "a performance of a performance." For its newest incarnation, at the Kitchen, Ms. Hay has invited two other dancers to remake "Voilà" from the libretto, which now doubles as a score, and to perform with her.

"I am resourceful," explains Ms. Hay, who last appeared in New York three years ago. "I like taking material apart. Rather than go on to another dance, let's see what else I can learn about this material from another perspective."

AT THE KITCHEN, MS. HAY hopes to learn more about her work as it exists independent of her own body. "For those people who see Deborah Hay's work as something only Deborah Hay can do," she says, "then what is my work as performed by other people?"

"I like these dances," she adds. "I want to see them go on. I like the idea of a dance student being able to reconstruct them from a score without our spending billions of dollars on technology."

Ms. Hay was once told that her dances were impossible to score in Labanotation, the field's generally accepted notation system. "I got very excited, because I didn't like the way it looked on the page," she says. "It really bothered me to think that my dance would be limited to these shaded rectangular boxes."

Any transmission of her dances needs to be an open process, because Ms. Hay does not want to close off the dancer's creative space.

"What I'm looking at with this process is: Can you pass on dance without telling anybody how to move, but instead by giving them a whole other set of parameters or conditions for recreating the dance? And is it still that same dance?"

To perform her experiment with "Voilà," Ms. Hay chose Grace Mille Lee, 29, and Scott Heron, 34, two former workshop participants. They received the libretto and meditation last year, but the choreographer will not see the results until this week. The three solos will be done separately, beginning with Ms. Hay's.

Mr. Heron, 34, who is based in New York, recently performed his evening-length dance "The Goat Story" at P.S. 122. Ms. Lee, who presented an evening of her solo dances at P.S. 122 last year, lives in Philadelphia. "They make me laugh and cry more than

The Beginnings of a Far-Ranging Creative Revolt

THE CHOREOGRAPHERS who emerged from the pioneering and sometimes even shocking Judson Dance Theater performances at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village in the 1960's were united in a desire to experiment and to reject conventional modern-dance forms. But they were never choreographically alike, and they have continued to go their own ways creatively.

Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown have retained their fascination with structure, yet their works have grown theatrically richer over the years as their companies have gained in renown. Deborah Hay's concern for repetitive patterned movement led her to invent communal rituals. Steve Paxton developed a form known as contact improvisation, in which people interacting can serve as symbols of social harmony.

Several former Judson choreographers have explored mixed media.

Elaine Summers has blended dance with film. David Gordon has combined choreography with witty punning dialogue. The texts spoken in Kenneth King's productions have included nonsensical tongue twisters, scientific theorizing and bizarre science fiction. Meredith Monk devised an extraordinary multimedia musical-theater form in which songs, chants, instrumental melodies and movement are linked.

Several prominent figures associated with Judson are no longer alive. Robert Ellis Dunn, the composition teacher out of whose workshop the dance theater grew, died last summer. James Waring, who created fantastic and whimsical works for both ballet and modern-dance companies, died in 1975.

Many former Judson dancers went into teaching. Others embarked upon new careers. Yvonne Rainer, whose choreography could be formally rigorous and intellectually challenging, gave up dance for film making in 1973, and Jennifer Tipton is now one of the dance world's leading lighting designers.

JACK ANDERSON



Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square in Greenwich Village.

any other performers," says Ms. Hay. "There is nothing those two won't do."

Ms. Lee, who saw a run-through of "Voilà" and a performance of "My Heart," sees the libretto as a screenplay. "I make sense of it as a whole," she explains, "by seeing it as an epic western, in which I play all of the outlandish characters playing out all of their individual dramas: protagonists, antagonists and cameos."

"I love the humor in the score, and I play it out fully," she says. "Deborah's work must be done with total involvement. You can't mark it or reduce it to a vocabulary. This may sound serious, but her work actually frequents the realm of absurdity."

Mr. Heron, too, remarks on the appealing absurdity of the project. His challenge, he says, was "to take what first appears to be complete nonsense and find the logic, mystery and beauty of the dance."

Ms. Hay's libretto-based monologue "A Performance of a Performance" will follow the three solos at 10 P.M. on Saturday only. Speaking the writing of the movement, Ms. Hay explains, has given new dimension to the original solo.

"The last few words in the libretto," she explains, "were simply a direction for what I was doing on stage." She began galloping in circles. Horse rider woman playing dancing. A human being galloping off. But when I write that down, it goes so many places. It's not me on the dance floor doing moves. Suddenly it has a fullness and poetry to it as an event. The words become embodied. When you're speaking it, the picture just gets bigger.

"And so now when I go back to dance "Voilà," I'm not just galloping in circles and exiting off. I really feel so much bigger than the act you're looking at on stage." □