

# The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2006

## On Endless Stages, Outdoor Dance Tempts Audiences and Trouble



Courtesy of Tom Pearson

Marissa Nielsen-Pincus, left, and Mayuna Shimizu in Tom Pearson's "Lacuna," a performance for Lincoln Center Out of Doors last week.

By ROSLYN SULCAS

Dancers spilling over balconies on Wall Street, whiplashing through the Lincoln Center reflecting pool or performing for thousands of people in Prospect Park are part and parcel of the pleasures of summertime in New York City. Aficionados tend to take such performances, which seem ubiquitous from June to September, for granted.

But they are no simple matter for their organizers, producers, dancers and stage crews, who face a host of unpredictable complications when they leave behind the comforts and certainties of a theater and move outdoors.

Today at noon and 12:30 p.m., Ellis Wood Dance will, for the last time this summer, add a colorful note to Wall Street on the exterior balconies at Cipriani. And in one week the Evening Stars series in Battery Park, part of the city's River to River festival, will herald the final flourish of the unofficial outdoor season with the Kansas City Ballet in Twyla Tharp's "Catherine Wheel" and two other pieces — if wind or rain does not intervene.

Weather is paramount. For reasons of cost and insurance, most festivals have no rain dates. If a one-time-only show is rained out — as was Lula Washington and Reggie Wilson's double bill scheduled for Lincoln Center Out of Doors on Aug. 10 — both preparation and anticipation are for naught. One year, the Lincoln Center festival tried to meet the problem head on by programming a group called "Weatherproof Dancers"; it had to cancel because of rain.

Some groups are slightly luckier. "We have artists who it rains on every time they perform, but the show goes on," said Jay Weissman, one of five partners in the Usual Suspects, the production company for the River to River Festival. "When the Merce Cunningham company came to Evening Stars in 2002, they had silver Mylar balloons floating around during the performance. It rained, and everything and everyone was covered in silver

Continued From First Arts Page

coating. Then it rained again during their performance last year. But the great thing about Merce is that his whole perspective on art is based on chance; he actually loved that there was an unscheduled break and that he had to decide where and how to start up again. Somehow that became part of the show."

Extreme heat or unpredictable cold can also sabotage performers, who can become dehydrated, develop muscle cramp or slip on damp surfaces. And there's not much to be done about bugs and creatures of the night. "Nikolai Hübbe once had a bat almost fly into his face in the middle of a piece," said Jenifer Ringer, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, which has annual summer seasons at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. "His jump was really good."

William Whitener, the artistic director of the Kansas City Ballet,

### Working around bats, bugs and dripping silver balloons.

vividly remembers a close encounter with nature when he was in the corps of Balanchine's "Square Dance" with the Joffrey Ballet at Wolf Trap near Washington in the 1970's. "You could feel the mosquitoes landing on your neck and biting," he said, "as you stood still for long minutes while the principal dancers took their time with their solos."

Bug spray is one of the many tools that Mr. Weissman and his production team have learned to bring. "We build from scratch every time, and we try to be prepared for as many situations as possible," he said. "We bring in tents for dressing rooms, masking tape for everything. The things you take for granted in a theater just aren't there."

Once the production team has set up the performance space and facilities for the dancers, the artistic elements come into play. Lighting is usually the most problematic: daytime shows can make only limited use of lights, and evening performances are constrained by the expense of hooking up to electricity and of bringing equipment to the site.

"We talk to the lighting designers of each company and create a plot that will work for everyone," Mr. Weissman said. "A plot is like a map: a drawing that shows where each in-

strument is. We can move lights around to some extent, but we want to do that as little as possible for cost reasons, so there is often some accommodation that the designers need to make."

For the New York City Ballet technicians in Saratoga Springs, the problem is different. They have sophisticated lighting equipment but can work only after the evening performance, when it is dark enough to gauge the effects properly. "They work until 4 or 5 in the morning," preparing for the next evening's performance, Ms. Ringer said. "After a week or so they have what they call Saratoga Lag."

Adjustments need to be made for pieces transferred outdoors from conventional theaters. Mr. Whitener will dispense with the smoke that adds atmosphere to the end of "The Catherine Wheel"; dances that finish with blackouts may need tinkering.

"Sometimes when there are fewer production elements, the focus is increased on the actual dancing, which is a very positive thing," said Jonathan Hollander, the artistic and executive director of the Battery Dance Company and head of the Downtown Dance Festival, which presented 16 dance companies at Chase Plaza on Nassau Street last week. "I've learned when choosing companies that the quality of the dancers is really important, and that if a work is very slow or delicate, the chances are the effect won't carry. It's harder outside because you don't have a captive audience, but the connection is much more immediate."

Dancers and choreographers, too, say they feel that connection, and appear unbothered by the transitional aspect — the frequent comings and goings, the occasional cellphone conversation — of their audiences.

"What I like about outdoor work is that it's a collaboration with the public," said Tom Pearson, who created "Lacuna" in the reflecting pool at Lincoln Center (they drained it first) for this year's Lincoln Center Out of Doors. "Everything in the environment becomes part of your work, and at the same time, people see how art interrupts or illuminates their everyday space."

Most outdoor performances are free, and the presenters have to raise money for them without help from a box office. What makes it worthwhile, they say, is that they can offer dance to people who would not normally see it. "It's a privilege to reach people who wouldn't necessarily have the money or leisure to attend ordinary performances," Mr. Hollander said. "There is so much beauty on stage, so much inspiration. You feel a sense of being spoiled by living in New York."

**THE ARTS**  
The New York Times