

STEPPING TOWARD A MORE MODERN FUTURE

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By PIA CATTON

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On this final day of February, sports fans are gearing up for the annual feast of college basketball that is "March Madness." New York would be a very different place if the same level of enthusiasm applied to next month's central onstage offering: modern dance.

The Paul Taylor Dance Company is already at City Center until March 6. Looking ahead, the Martha Graham Dance Company will celebrate its 85th anniversary at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater from March 15 to 20, and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's Legacy Tour is set to make a stop at the Joyce Theater from March 22 to 27. It's enough make one wonder how much modern dance this city has an appetite for. And if the big names take up all the mindshare, what about contemporary choreographers like Larry Keigwin, who'll be at the Joyce from March 8 to 13?

Every company has its dedicated supporters and fans, but across the board the field is struggling to broaden the appeal: Modern dance is going through an existential shift.

For established companies, the concern is balancing new works and repertory. "The field is dealing with a maturation," said Janet Eilber, artistic director of the Martha Graham Dance Company. "It was born out of revolt and driven by revolt. We have now classics of American modern dance, but the field has never focused on how to keep them potent."

For younger companies, everything from the sustainability of the nonprofit model to the very name of the art form is up for debate. "The community is trying to find a new language," said Lane Harwell, director of Dance NYC, a service organization for the industry. "The assumptions that drove people to form their 501(c)3s—including the hope of income from foundations and a board that is going to miraculously fund-raise and professionalize the operation—are changing."

And the linguistic issue is no esoteric one: The new entity established by the merger of choreographer Bill T. Jones's dance company and Dance Theater Workshop—New York Live Arts— doesn't even have the word "dance" in the title. At a recent panel discussion about that transition, Mr. Jones suggested moving away from the word "dance" entirely, replacing it with broader terms such as "body-based movement" or "body-based performance."

If you're reacting with a sigh of resignation, consider that the word "dance" can be a liability when trying to find a friend to take to a performance. But say you're going to a show that is dance as a spoof of an aerobics class (costume mandatory) and suddenly you've got a hot ticket in your hand. "There is a hunger for more ways to experience and interact with dance," said Mr. Harwell.

The Williamsburg-based choreographer Noemie LaFrance has made site-specific performances her forte, setting works in a Lower East Side parking garage, on Frank Gehry buildings around the world and, most recently, against a cement wall at a Department of Sanitation salt storage area. (She's also working in film: On Monday at 7 p.m., the Flea Theater at 41 White Street is presenting a free screening of her work "Eyes Nose Mouth.") Ms. LaFrance says she broke out of traditional theaters because the setting began to feel contrived and limiting. "It is not reflecting how life is. I wanted to create a form of performance that was integrating the environment a lot more. So you are not just isolating the art form of dance."

In a similar way, the creators of "Beautiful Burnout," now at St. Ann's Warehouse in DUMBO until March 27, are presenting a narrative about boxing by engaging as intensely as possible with a variety of forms. The show's co-director and co-choreographer, Steven Hoggett, describes his creative ambition as: "To create a theatrical experience that is about text, movement, sound and light."

Not every choreographer, however, wants to apply dance to outside concepts or unusual locations. Nor should they. The companies that work in traditional, modern dance exist in part to train emerging talent in the basics of the form; without that groundwork, choreographers cannot stretch technique in new directions or apply dance to other fields.

But so many traditional, professional companies—the ones that don't have names like Alvin Ailey or Paul Taylor in the title—operate on the margins. Jonathan Hollander, for example, has been keeping Battery Dance Company afloat in TriBeCa for nearly 30 years. As funding continues to dry up, he'll have to be more aggressively creative about survival. "Entrepreneurial dance companies will have to figure out a new source of nutrition," he said.

And those at the top of the heap have their own struggles. At the Martha Graham Company, Ms. Eilber's focus is fostering a sense of openness: increasing communication with the audience (spoken introductions before programs), connecting to new choreographers and using new media. "All of these efforts are born out of the question, 'What does modern dance need to be looking at?'" she said. "Our goal is to create audience access techniques and bring in new artists and new works that are aware of and spring from the classics of American modern dance—so it has more to say."