

# DOSSIER

[HOME](#) [BLOG](#) [ABOUT](#) [CURRENT ISSUE](#) [STYLE](#) [READ](#) [LOOK](#) [EDITIONS](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#) [LINKS](#)

« [Dirty Baby Triologue](#)

[Upper Crust](#) »

## Jazz Choreography Enterprises



There was a time, quite recently, when my knowledge of jazz dance was limited to the works of Bob Fosse. And by “the works of Bob Fosse,” I mean *Chicago*—the film version—and I only watched that one because I was intrigued by the idea of John C. Reilly starring in an Oscar-winning musical. So imagine my surprise when I attended the New York Jazz Choreography Project at Alvin Ailey on November 13<sup>th</sup>. Jazz dance, I quickly learned, extends far beyond the era of vaudevillians, fishnet-clad murderesses and Prohibition. In fact, the genre is still fresh in 2010 with no apparent expiration date.

The Project, presented by Jazz Choreography Enterprises (JCE), is a showcase of fourteen distinct dances, ranging in style from the classic to the futuristic—the predictable to the unexpected. Think of artistic directors Marian Hyun and Merete Muentert as curators: in order to exhibit the multi-faceted nature of jazz dance, they have selected pieces which feature choreographers and performers of various generations, cultures and levels of experience. With the hope of keeping your attention, I won’t gloss over every routine; rather, I will present a smattering of the dances in order to give you a feel for its substance and scope, saving the “medalists” for last.

The evening begins with “Rat Pack,” a glitzy number that harkens Atlantic City circa the 1950s, when dapper crooners like Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. charmed the crowds at Skinny D’Amato’s 500 Club. Choreographed by Sue Samuels and Kelly Carrol, it’s fun and Fosse-like, though it won’t satisfy a discerning dance pallet. This is fine, I suppose, since the Rats are merely an amuse-bouche for the thirteen-course meal to follow. Skipping down the set list, we come to Christopher Liddell’s “Adavu Tandava,” a dance that evolves out of a rather sprightly—and, therefore, paradoxical—session of meditation. Hyun plays a yoga guru with a following of four equally limber students. The steps are uncomplicated and seemingly rudimentary, but the performance as a whole is as soothing as a cup of honeyed green tea.

Before advancing to the highlight reel, I’d like to mention “Mission: Impossible,” a cheeky romp-around choreographed by , or “Luigi,” as he is known to colleagues and admirers. The dance features three fearless women, stealthily executing acrobatics to the tune of one of the coolest theme songs in Pop World history. While it wasn’t one of my favorite pieces, I was impressed by this 85-year-old Luigi seated front row and center—unofficial “King for the Night.” At first, I had no clue as to who he was, but after skimming through the program I found what I had been missing: Luigi is a legend, internationally known as a “Father of Modern Dance.” He danced in such films as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Singin’ in the Rain*, and later he taught the greats of both the stage and film: Twyla Tharp, Liza Minnelli, John Travolta and many more. Here we were, I thought, sitting in a 235-seat theater, with a man who was granted a nickname by none other than Gene Kelly.

Modern status aside, I’d be curious to know how Luigi feels about Muentner’s “The Marathon.” Five clumsy characters run in circles, occasionally toppling over one another as the chorus of Propellerheads’s “Velvet Pants” thumps through the house speakers:

He’s wearing velvet pants

That’s why she talks to him

He’s wearing velvet pants

That’s why she talks to him

*(Repeat four more times).*

Now, if Project were the Olympics of jazz dance, this routine would be my pick for the bronze. Please know that I am not proud of my choice. However, in my defense, just picture the sight to which the audience was subjected: Three girls pretending to be out-of-shape rock Lululemon gear (as if the precious duds could transform them into first-string athletes) and pump their legs, their heels beating against butt cheeks like pistons with each stride. One guy, who looks like a poor man’s Ashton Kutcher, is fabulously gangly in sweat-wicking Adidas pants. He is, obviously, the man in the “velvet pants,” yet it is the pocket-sized man—in the sunny tank top and unfortunate red shorts—who steals the show. He winks and pats “Ashton’s” rear-end as he files into the formation of this jog-slash-dance. Silly yes, but I would hope that even the most traditionalist jazz dance fans would appreciate the ridiculousness of “The Marathon.” After all, the trademark of *Singin’ in the Rain* is of course the scene when Kelly and friends, enrobed in yellow slickers, cavort in an unbelievably impromptu dance.

Going home with the silver, we have “Palpitations,” choreographed by Liz Piccoli. A triptych dance, each panel features a different couple, theme and song. The first is a hippie frolic, the last an impish game of cradle-robbing. While both sets feature dancers of remarkable talent, it is the center panel—the salty meat of the sandwich—that is the culprit for our irregular heartbeats. The whole thing reeks of naughtiness. He is shirtless, baring what appears to be an eight-pack, his linen pants hanging from the hooks of his pelvis. His head is swathed in a kerchief, a style that very few men can pull off—and he does it, like some sort of sexy urban pirate. His partner, a woman whose body is a perfect match, is nobody’s sweetheart. Veiled by nothing more than a second-skin chemise, she and Sexy Urban Pirate tempt each other into slapping embraces that are sensual, almost violent. There are certain moments when it almost seems as if they are gymnasts in Cirque du Soleil; they entwine, spinning themselves into what seems to be their own cocoon, somersaulting and coalescing into impossible positions. “I’d love to kill you with a kiss,” sings the sultry Kate Melua, “I’d like to strike you down with bliss.” I’m not going to lie: I wanted to see that happen. It would have been spectacular. Then, after I thought about what I had just wished for, I wanted to go to confession.

So, thank God for the golden one: Svea Schneider’s “Perfect Prototype,” a wonderfully weird dance in which I reveled without a shred of guilt. As disturbing as it may seem on the surface (think: dissembled mannequins), there’s something refreshingly wholesome underlying the entire charade. After all, every kid who has ever been in a department store has wondered, at some point or another, “How should I reposition these mannequins to make this window display funnier?” If only moms could be distracted—but, of course, they are invulnerable to foolery. Therefore the dream has only thrived in the minds of children. Until now, that is.

“Prototype” begins obscurely, so überly European. All is muted except for the electronica, bumping through the theater, which for a few seconds feels more like a night club. Gradually, a blue light casts shadows on the seven figures onstage. They’re identical—plus or minus an inch, a pound or two. Everything is black: bobs, bangs, turtlenecks, leggings. It’s like watching an artsy version of “Sprockets,” the *Saturday Night Live* skit in which Mike Myers plays a German talk show host named Dieter. Only here, there is no talking. Fortunately, hilarity still ensues—and it’s a smarter, quirkier brand of comedy than that of Mr. Myers.

For the first minute of the dance, I was unaware of the mannequins. I thought they were just women who happened to be seated. Everyone was moving robotically—perhaps the sitters’ part of the dance had yet to start. This sounds stupid—obviously, and I realize that—but I truly believe that I was not the only one who was flabbergasted when the five fleshed figures began plucking the appendages from the two synthetic figures. It’s as if the actual dancers don’t have ball-and-socket joints; their kinesiology mimics that of fiberglass and hinges. Their humanity becomes visible only when they create poses for the mannequins. They’re creative, amusing and occasionally inappropriate. Guaranteed: every child in the audience was rejoicing (inside). Some, maybe, were squirming with jealousy.

And that, readers, is the New York Jazz Choreography Project in a nutshell. If the JCE’s goal is “to present choreography in a variety of jazz styles,” then they’ve certainly succeeded. They’re next Project will take place in March of 2011. Check out their website for more information on performances, classes and workshops: [www.jazzchoreographyenterprises.org](http://www.jazzchoreographyenterprises.org).

This entry was written by Jennifer Dwoskin, posted on November 23, 2010 at 7:31 pm, filed under Reviews, Theater and tagged Alvin Ailey, Eugene Louis Faccuito, Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Liz Piccoli, Svea Schneider, The Rat Pack. Bookmark the permalink. Follow any comments here with the RSS feed for this post. Post a comment or leave a trackback: Trackback URL.

---