

# THE post-modern TWO-STEP

By Diana Scott

**W**HEN NEW VAUDEVILLIAN BILL IRWIN was pursued on stage several years ago by a critic wielding a giant pencil ("In Regard of Flight"), his flight from prevailing definitions of art recalled minimalist choreographer Yvonne Rainer's mid-'60s challenge to mainstream modern dance. Rainer, and her avant-garde dance cohorts of "Grand Union," in their legendary performances at Judson Church, rejected almost everything that had come to characterize American modern dance, the personalized, non-balletic art form epitomized in the work of Martha Graham.

This meant saying "No," as Rainer did, to: spectacle, virtuosity, transformation, magic, make-believe, glamour, the star image, the heroic, the anti-heroic, trash imagery, involvement of performer or spectator, camp, seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer, eccentricity, moving or being moved. Implicit in this "de-mystifying" rejection was disdain for commercial appeal, and the embrace of a democratized creative process. Yet the experiments of minimalists were overridingly apolitical; and they were consumed by a relatively small group of artists and intellectuals.

**New York writ large:** Bill Irwin's most recent work, *Largely/New York: Further Adventures of a Post-Modern Hooper*, takes on the state of post-modern dance circa 1988, and it's clear that times have changed since Rainer's manifesto. As dance critic Sally Banes has noted, a second wave of post-modernism (or is it post-modern neo-

modernism?!) is colored less by what it rejects than by the boundaries that it crosses. Much has been made, for example, of the cross-over of modern choreographers into ballet, where commissions are now being awarded for dances that borrow stylistically from both genres.

Less has been said, though, of re-emerging populist influences—including break-dancing and other popular entertainment forms—which have been liberated by the latest post-modern thaw. In espousal of these protean values—comedy, vernacular music, mimed gesture, episodic narrative, and a cartoonish shorthand for character development—the new vaudeville is converging with a vibrant strain of new, post-modern dance.

With his dusty top hat, cane and crumpled tails, Irwin's aging hooper is well-suited for his latest foray. Post-modern dancers of the '70s were cool technicians whose thick-soled sneakers fitted the rigors of an increasingly demanding, high-speed craft; many of their late-'80s successors have donned elegant top hats and tails. Thus, the hobo's upscale aspirations are as evident as his populist origins.

Conversely, the clown-punk look of post-modern choreographer Nina Martin's *Modern Daze*, seen recently at P.S. ("Performance Space") 122 on New York City's Lower East Side, emphasized other humble influences on this hybrid dance-theater tradition.

**Jumbling genres:** Performing uptown, at City Center, Irwin and his 20-member en-

semble used dance as dialect and attempted to learn each other's language. Their efforts were repeatedly frustrated by technological failure. Departing from earlier works, Irwin eschewed spoken text, letting distinct movement styles and gestures (break-dancing, "classical" modern, soft shoe and herd-ensemble) speak for themselves and create recognizable characters, more than situations.

There are a pair of break dancers who, when their boom-box fails, would rather quit than switch to "Tea for Two." There's also the remote, long-limbed modern soloist who, with her back to the audience and eye on the video monitor, performs Graham-like contractions with ballet-barre concentration to the fragmented rumble of a John Cage-like score. Then there's Irwin himself, unsteady, affable and indomitable, eager to put aside his old routines and learn a few new tricks.

He joins hands with the breakers and abdicates control as his arms become squared-off wave patterns transmitting segmented, popping rhythms. His heart shamelessly on his sleeve, he is pressed into service as the cool soloist's partner, stumbling to keep up, while she never misses a beat.

Against a chorus of dancers who double as lost, post-modern souls and a predatory horde of graduates, yesterday's hooper takes the spotlight with a transmitter-like remote control box. With child-like zeal he aims it at stage curtains (which rise, fall or do nothing); at audio-visual equipment (which responds or doesn't); at his pursuers

(who disperse and reappear).

Rather than extending his reach, however, technology almost proves his undoing: a surplus blip of the button finds him hoisted, leg first, to the rafters along with the curtain, his cam-corder dangling. Likewise, in a virtuosically coordinated struggle between hooper and VCR, the image of his face is trapped in the onstage video monitor, while his body struggles to pull free. In this contest between subject and simulacrum, a handy low-tech cleaner is the chosen tool of his would-be liberators.

**Foreboding flip-side:** But there's a flip-side to this funny and vulnerable post-modern pilgrimage, a sub-text that's more foreboding. The video-camera persistently brackets single, falling dancers, as they become mutely motionless; the chorus crowds around the monitor to see the aestheticized replay of this hush-hush epidemic.

In the final moments of *Largely/New York*, the raised proscenium curtain reveals a backstage littered with bodies—a bleak acknowledgement of the AIDS specter haunting the performing-arts community. Meanwhile, to a blast of catchy music, the solitary hooper repeats his circular warm-up jog.

In *Modern Daze*, Nina Martin and Madelein Olnick composed the spoken text that is a neat counterpart to Martin's resilient, athletic movement style. Building on an earlier style that combined the disjointed energy of break-dancing with a weightier, high-impact fluidity of improvised catch-and-tumble sports, the new, word-rich format has a more blunt-edged nerviness, laced with social irony.

Her earlier work, *Moving Violations*, seemed to pulsate like visual artist Keith Haring's early subway drawings (primitive, cookie-cutter shapes of animals, adults and babies with a halo of sunburst lines, for emphasis). The new work has more of the deadpan detail of comic strip captions or the manipulative suggestiveness of MTV ads. Interchangeable characters in shrill-colored punk dresses enact déjà-vu parables of daily life that dissolve into one another, dream-like, rather than resolve.

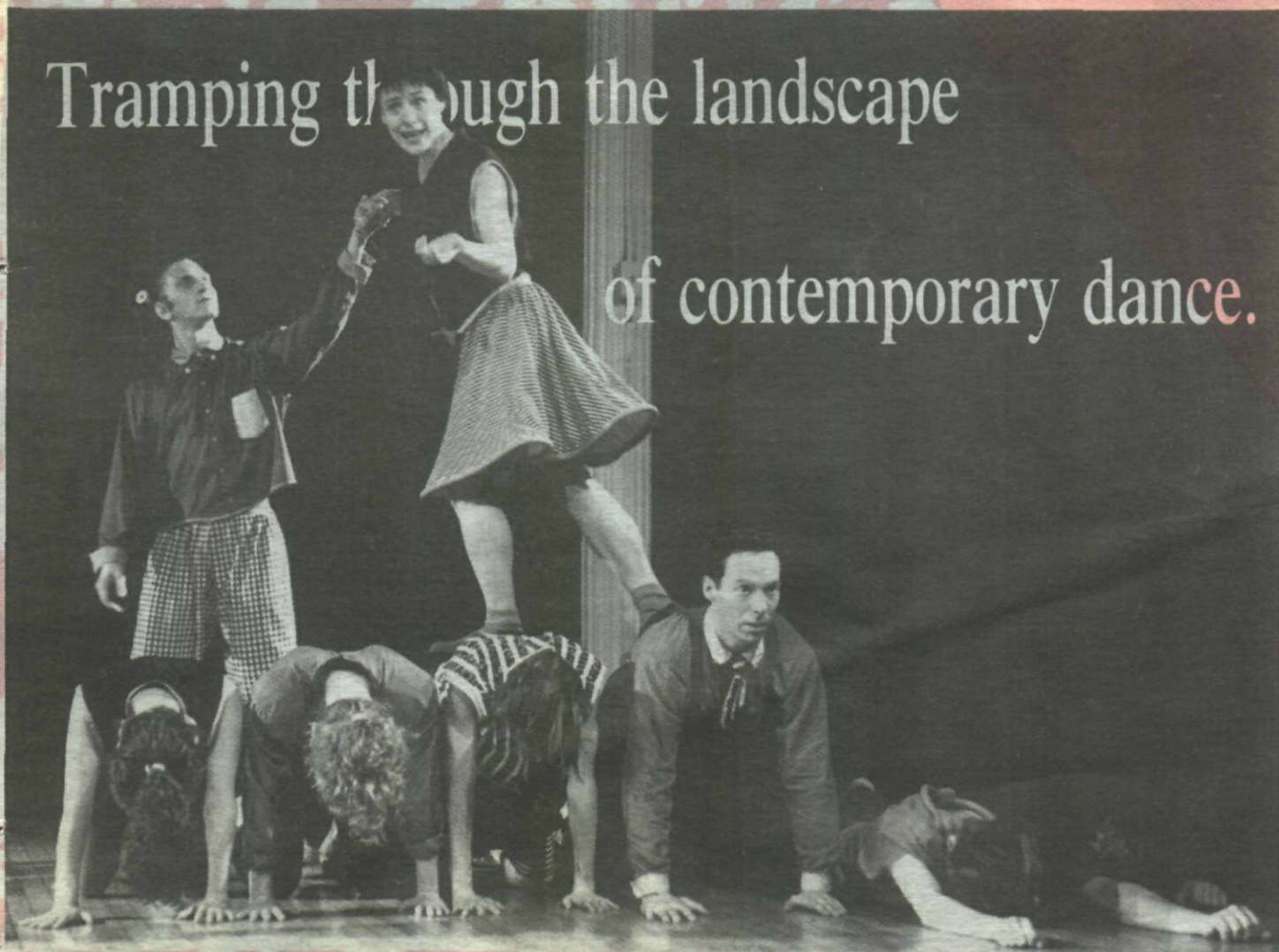
"Life is a rich, bountiful banquet, but are you like the family dog...eating crumbs off the table?" intones one dancer. The answer: reprogramming at the *Life Training Institute*. "You must learn to love and live for who? Yourself of course." Not doing so is like sitting at the table of life and saying "Pass the pain please."

"Join us now and start loving yourself today. [Aside:] All major credit cards accepted."

Self-love replaces social advocacy, seductively cancelling moral/ethical deliberations. "What's the point of spending your life putting a tiny little dent in a problem that

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Tramping through the landscape  
of contemporary dance.



c. Donna Ann McAdams

Nina Martin trips the light fantastic on the backs of the homeless in *Modern Daze*.