

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

The 'naughty boy' of modern dance shows no signs of slowing down

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The Paul Taylor Dance Company's last tour to Canada was in 2000, when it appeared at Montreal's Place des Arts. If you want to catch a performance this time around, you'll have to venture outside the major cities: Think Brampton, Ont., St. Catharines, Markham or Kingston.

At 80, he is the last remaining pioneer of modern dance still alive, and, more to the point, still creating. Nabbing his legendary New York-based company is a feather in the caps of the feisty programmers in these smaller centres.

"We four theatres often work together to create a viable tour," says Brian McCurdy, cultural director for the city of Kingston. "The more dates, the more attractive the offer. We're all thrilled about Taylor." The tour starts with the Rose Theatre in Brampton on Apr. 26, and hits the other cities on the next three nights.

Taylor, who was born in Washington, D.C., in 1930, is modern dance royalty. He performed with Martha Graham's company for seven years – it was the iconic Graham herself who dubbed Taylor "the naughty boy of dance," because he took on any theme, no matter how outrageous.

The Globe reached Taylor at his New York studio.

How do you feel about not appearing in a major city?

We're glad to come to any place to perform, but I do understand that two of the venues are near Toronto. I guess no one else asked us.

You came to dance very late – when you were in your third year at the University of Syracuse. Why the switch?

It was to get away from painting. I was also a swimmer and I craved activity. As a painter, I was standing behind an easel. A girl in my painting class belonged to a little dance group and she asked me to partner her. I fell in love with dance and took my final year at Juilliard in the dance program. I was 22 and I had to really work hard.

How did you get into Martha Graham's company with so little training?

I did have teachers from the Graham company at Juilliard, but basically, it was pure luck. There weren't too many men in modern dance, so I had that going for me. I was big, eager and I looked good. My body was in shape because of swimming, and I understood training and discipline.

What was Graham like? She is such a legend.

I just loved Martha, although she was difficult and outrageous. It's not a well-known fact about her, but she could be very funny. We'd laugh and laugh at rehearsals. I still think about her. She left an indelible impression on me.

What was Graham's strongest influence on you?

You could say it was a negative influence. I wanted to be sure that my dances didn't look like hers. It was knowing what not to do. Of course, I did steal things, like a run in *Aureole*.

You're known as a very eclectic choreographer.

I hope so, because I want to be different each time. I actually try to forget a work once it's created so I can start afresh. I challenge myself to create something I haven't done before. There are, of course, resonances of the old in the new.

For example, what are you working on now?

It's called *The Uncommitted*, and is about people who don't connect, or who can't stay connected for very long. The new thing is using four pieces by composer Arvo Pärt. I've never used his music before, and it's unlike anything else that I've set dances to.

What would you say is the Paul Taylor signature?

Dance steps. In other words, my dancers dance, unlike a lot of the self-indulgent trash coming out of Europe that's filled with technology, acrobatics, aerial stuff, and the like. It's people following trends. They just want to do the latest thing. I did like Pina Bausch's work, though, because her company moved to a definite point of view. Did you know that we were at Juilliard at the same time? We studied ballet together with Antony Tudor.

Does this mean that you've never included technology or text in your dances?

The stage, lights and dancing are good enough for me. Besides, all that technology is expensive, and funding is getting tougher all the time.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

The dancers themselves are an inspiration, and often, when I'm beginning a new piece, I'll look at the company and see who is due for a good part. Music is important. I hear dances in the music. Also, something that I see can trigger an idea. *Esplanade*, for example, was inspired by a girl running to catch a bus. It was the running that I thought was so beautiful.

What do you look for in your dancers?

Strong technique, but that's not hard to find because schools are turning out whiz kids. I also look for individuality – a new dancer can't look like someone already in the company, and they each have to be attractive in some way. Finally, the person has to be a good team member because we are a professional family where trust is very important.

What's it like being the last man standing, as it were, and what do you think your legacy will be?

If you outlive everyone else, you're the only one at the top. As for my legacy, I hope they'll say that I was a nice guy and that I meant well.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

The Paul Taylor Dance Company tours to the Rose Theatre, Brampton, Ont. (April 26); Brock University Centre for the Arts, St. Catharines, Ont. (April 27); Markham Theatre, Markham, Ont. (April 28); and the Grand Theatre, Kingston (April 29).

The works:

The acclaimed 16-member Paul Taylor Dance Company will perform four different retrospective programs on the Ontario tour, including some of Taylor's most famous works:

Rose Theatre, Brampton (April 26)

Also Playing (2009)

The Word (1998)

Esplanade (1975)

Brock University Centre for the Arts, St. Catharines (April 27)

Cloven Kingdom (1976)

Phantasmagoria (2010)

Company B (1991)

Markham Theatre for Performing Arts, Markham (April 28)

Polaris (1976)

Three Dubious Memories (2010)

Promethean Fire (2002)

Grand Theatre, Kingston (April 29)

Arden Court (1981)

Dust (1977)

Black Tuesday (2001)

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