Because She Said So . . . Twyla Tharp and the American Dansical

> My more recent attempt to introduce the word "dansical" into the language of dance has so far met with scant response. [. . .] A pity for we do need to find a new definition for a new form in theatrical dance -- a Broadway-style musical in which there are no singers and no actors, only dancers. It is not a musical, as such. And it's not exactly a ballet [. . .]. So what is it, exactly?
>
> Clive Barnes, 2004[1]

Ah, the "dansical" -- that coined and confounding term, suggestive of both a *liminal paradigm* (blurring the line between concert dance and musical theatre) and a *compelling paradox* (negating the traditional musical model while claiming musical theatre status). Yet, its liminal and paradoxical nature is not limited to linguistics, for the term also denotes a material stage construct -- one which has merged and mutated the musical theatre and ballet genres, resulting in a *unique American musical form*, simultaneously helped, haunted, and hindered by its own hybrid nature. As such, the "dansical" assumes a transformative place and power within the musical theatre arena, as well as facilitates a *choreographer's domain* on Broadway, flexing concert dance muscle and flaunting a concert pedigree. This paradigm provides a heady platform for any choreographic auteur willing and able to straddle both worlds, redefining and reshaping old genre expectations and configurations to realize and codify a distinctive artistic vision. Such an auteur is *Twyla Tharp*. Throughout her career, Tharp has developed, defined, and promoted the dansical, culminating with her Broadway triumph, *Movin' Out* (2002). This work, which represents a highpoint for the dance evolution/revolution on the American musical stage, also suggests a realm of legitimacy and potentiality for the dansical -- a realm dictated by Tharp whose authority, autonomy, and status enabled her to create a "ballet" on Broadway, declare it a "musical," and have it widely embraced as such.

To foreground this assertion, one must first clarify and contextualize the American dansical. Thus, my own two-pronged definition is as follows: 1) The dansical is a dance-dominant production created by a choreographic auteur and intended as a musical theatre work for Broadway; 2) The dansical moves choreography/dance to the forefront where it dominates (and sometimes diminishes) the score and libretto, while the production's star is the choreographer who asserts authorial control and content through her signature movement. But how does a choreographer assume such a monopolistic role? In 1985, theorist Bert States addressed the phenomenology of the singer/dancer on stage whose musical performance is a "self-expressive form of theater." In the "self-expressive" mode, the performer steps "out of the illusion" when he begins to sing or dance within a production; and the musical number, itself, becomes "an audacious display of the actor's power" where "suddenly the flow is broken" and "artistry becomes the object of our attention."[2] I submit that the "self-expressive" mode is one in which the Broadway choreographer may also work; specifically, her choreography may figuratively step "out of the illusion" and become more important as an "audacious display" of technical or aesthetic wizardry than a collaborative, integrated element. In this self-expressive manner, the choreographer can phenomenologically step to the front of the stage, through her proxy dancers, and garner acknowledgement and acclaim. Importantly, the choreographer must also assume an authoritative position (i.e., the role of director) by which she can control or shape the other stage elements, as well as subdue or silence collaborative or integrative voices (book and score), ultimately asserting total choreographic dominance and creating a fully-realized self-expressive work (i.e., dansical). [3]

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[1] Clive Barnes, "Attitudes," *Dance Magazine* (June 2004), 98.

[2] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 162-165.

[3] A crucial clarification is needed here. There exists another category of contemporary dance productions which have enjoyed successful Broadway runs and/or international theatre tours (e.g., *Riverdance*, *Tap Dogs*, *Burn the Floor*, *Forever Tango*, etc.); but they do not qualify as dansicals. Such dance productions were not originally created or primarily positioned as musicals; neither are they wholly defined by

Of course, these defining characteristics have often complicated the position, status, and legitimacy of the dansical within America's musical theatre arena, especially when this arena has historically been recognized for and credited with advancing the "ideal" of the integrated, interactive, and symbiotic music/text/dance form sometimes termed the "Total Work," or, as coined by Richard Wagner in the mid 1800s, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Notwithstanding the many critics, scholars, artists, and audience members who applauded dansicals such as *Dancin'* (1978), *Fosse* (1999), *Swing!* (1999), *Contact* (1999), and *Movin' Out*, there were prominent parties who questioned the genre "purity" and validity of these works, as well as resisted their distortion and/or dismissal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal. For example, Mark Grant laments that the dansical "exploded the paradigm of the integrated book musical," complaining: "When the primary language of theater is no longer word, character, or music but rather gesture, movement, and staging, the power and legitimacy of language and music are undermined."[4] Joseph P. Swain concurs, writing that when a director/choreographer's control of a production enables him to emphasize certain elements (notably, staging and choreography) at the expense of score and book, the musical "becomes something else."[5] Thus, although the Broadway run of *Movin' Out* was met by a chorus of critical bravos and an enthusiastic box office, it also incited a reception paradigm of confusion and consternation in regards to its concert dance aesthetic/construct and somewhat conflicting "musical" designation. *New York Times*' Ben Brantley, while praising the show, nonetheless voiced the majority opinion that the dansical exemplified a poststructural conundrum as it refuted concrete categorization and confounded genre parameters: "Even at a time when the Broadway musical keeps stretching into new categories to find new audiences, *Movin' Out* fits no pigeonhole."[6]

Yet, *Movin' Out* was neither castigated nor dismissed as an interloper, anomaly, and/or "bastard child" within the Broadway musical arena; instead, it was held up by many as a potent exemplar of the "dansical" form and accorded a valid musical theatre lineage and legacy. For example, in *Newsday*, Linda Winer declared *Movin' Out* to be "an ecstatic throwback to what we called dancicals [sic] in the Bob Fosse-driven '70s."[7] A "throwback," yes, but also a harbinger of the future, with a new status and codified position -- both of which could be attributed to the self-expressive power and prestige of its formidable auteur, Twyla Tharp. Born July 1, 1941, Tharp is still one of the most celebrated and recognized names in concert dance, having introduced a critically acclaimed signature dance technique, founded an eponymous dance company, and choreographed an immensely broad and popular repertoire of concert works, as well as a handful of movie and stage musicals. Further, her ascent to the top of the dance world was unusually swift and momentous. Soon after her first critically lauded concert piece, *The Fugue* (1970), she commanded national attention and cemented a reputation as an American iconoclast, populist, and pioneer on the cusp of a new concert technique/aesthetic, often "pushing the envelope" in terms of her unorthodox dance vocabulary, musical scores, and commissions. Exemplifying this progression and paradigm are works such as 1973's *Deuce Coupe* (commissioned by Joffrey Ballet and

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and attributed to self-expressive choreographers who are acknowledged as the productions' dominant, signature, and omnipresent auteurs. As a result, the works frequently feel more communal and organically evolved, with the choreography somewhat subservient to the virtuosic performers or an already established dance tradition. In short, such productions are most often categorized as *imported dance spectacles/events* and treated as entities separate from the musical theatre genre. Akin to these productions are Broadway (and Off-Broadway) works which are movement-based, kinetic spectacles (e.g., *Stomp*). Yet, they also lack the stamp of a single, specific choreographic auteur. Further, they have been assigned a new Broadway designation, that is, "Special Theatrical Event" (the official Tony Award category). This is not the case with dansicals such as *Dancin'*, *Fosse*, *Dangerous Games*, *Contact*, *Swing!*, and *Movin' Out*, each being deemed a "Broadway musical" from the onset and bearing the signature, guiding hand of a proprietary choreographer/director, i.e., Bob Fosse, Graciela Daniele, Susan Stroman, Lynn Taylor-Corbett, and Twyla Tharp, respectively.

[4] Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 298.

[5] Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 360.

[6] Ben Brantley, "In a Top 40 State of Mind," *New York Times*, 25 October 2002, 1:3.

[7] Linda Winer, "A Movin' Dancical of Waste of War, Power of Art," *Newsday.com*, 25 October 2002, http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/stage/ny-c2977115oct25.story (accessed October 30, 2002).

set to a musical backdrop[8] of Beach Boys tunes) and 1976's *Push Comes to Shove* (a reflexive ballet parody/commentary, created for Mikhail Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre). In *Dance in America* (1985), Robert Coe describes *Deuce Coup* as the "popular art" ballet which made Tharp "the darling and the brat of the dance world."[9] Regarding *Push/Shove*, Ellen Switzer in *Dancers!* (1982) posits: "If there is such a thing as a hit ballet, Tharp has produced it."[10] Resultantly, during the mid '70s, dance critic/scholar Arlene Croce declared Tharp "a herald of a new age."[11]

Importantly, this "new age" was signified by Tharp's self-expressive choreography as she playfully and potently merged her own diverse dance training (modern, ballet, jazz) and love of American pop culture/idioms with a formalist aesthetic and methodology. Coe describes her art as an "entirely personal intersection of ballet, jazz, spunk, spit, and a little of the old soft-shoe [. . .] -- a fusion of styles that meant nothing less than a new kind of contemporary classicism."[12] Accordingly, Croce lauded Tharp's "quality of plain speech in classical choreography," proclaiming that such a fusion was on the verge of becoming "a new style."[13] And as Tharp's choreography became increasingly codified, it was also deemed "signature" movement. Dance anthologist Carin T. Ford denotes a "Tharp dance" as one that "has at least two things going on at the same time, and the dancers themselves have a loose-jointed, off-balance look;"[14] while Hubert Saal details Tharp's "populist" leanings and the assimilation/appropriation of social dance and pedestrian movement within her modern dance discipline, writing that Tharp "sees grace in awkwardness. [. . .] She finds her dance material in ordinary walking, on ordinary dance-hall floors."[15]

Acknowledged as a critical/popular success and self-expressive choreographic authority, Tharp entered the '80s empowered to explore and exploit the theatrical potential of narrative dance within the concert sphere. Thus, in the space of three years, she created a triumvirate of dance theatre pieces -- all of which figure prominently in the Tharpian paradigm of the dansical and stand in her repertoire as forerunners to *Movin' Out*. The works are *Chapters and Verses* (1979), *When We Were Very Young* (1980), and *The Catherine Wheel* (1981). Set to a composite score, the first work -- *Chapters and Verses* -- employs dialogue (by the dancers) in its choreographic depiction of the coming-of-age experiences of youths in the 1970s. Although crucially positioned by Coe as a work at the "threshold" of Tharp's "odyssey toward a new dance-theatre form,"[16] *Chapters* received predominantly negative reviews in 1979. Foreshadowing laments regarding the dansical's confounding mergence of concert dance and musical theatre, Croce accused *Chapters* of containing "a glib super-Broadway style I have never-before associated with Twyla Tharp."[17]

Indeed, if the "echoes of Broadway" reverberating throughout *Chapters* disconcerted Croce, Tharp's follow-up work would provoke even more anxiety and interrogation. In 1980, Tharp worked with librettist Thomas Babe and composer John Simon to create the narrative dance piece *When We Were Very Young* [*WWVY*]. As denoted by Coe, this "American dream [. . .] turned nightmare" depicts a

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[8] The Joffrey performance also included a graffiti backdrop painted live by local New York street artists.

[9] Robert Coe, *Dance in America* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985), 216.

[10] Ellen Switzer, *Dancers! Horizons in American Dance* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 119.

[11] Quoted in Coe, *Dance in America*, 217.

[12] Coe, *Dance in America*, 215.

[13] Quoted in Switzer, *Dancers! Horizons in American Dance*, 114.

[14] Carin T. Ford, *Legends of American Dance and Choreography* (Berkeley Heights: Enslow, 2000), 68.

[15] Hubert Saal, "Dance as Slouch and Twitch," *Newsweek* (19 October 1981), 104.

[16] Coe, *Dance in America*, 207.

[17] Quoted in Coe, *Dance in America*, 218.

mother's suffering, cruelty, instability, and premature death, as recounted by her son to his young daughter, and sets the recollections against the son's own idealized notion of the American home and family.[18] With *WWWVY*, Tharp also thrust her concept and construct of the "dansical" upon a newly converged theatre/concert stage. Accordingly, Coe anthologizes the production as an "evening-length dance-theatre piece with words" and explains that "audiences awaiting the rebirth of *South Pacific* would be kept waiting" as *WWWVY* "would evolve into something entirely new: a *dansical*,[19] involving an original score, a constant stream of dancing and mime, and a spoken text to parallel them both."[20] Debuting at Broadway's Winter Garden, *WWWVY* received mixed reviews; specifically, critic Tobi Tobias declared the work to be "tediously like the eternal kvetch."[21] Tharp, however, was not deterred from further exploring and confounding perceived boundaries between concert dance and musical theatre. Thus, eighteen months later, Tharp and her dance company premiered her seventy-eight-minute, apocalyptic opus *The Catherine Wheel* (1981), which enjoyed a four-week Broadway engagement at the Winter Garden (one of the longest Broadway runs by any modern dance company). Significantly, many dance critics and scholars anthologize the work as an evolution of *WWWVY*. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt, in her *Village Voice* review, wrote that *Wheel* featured *WWWVY*'s "same embittered family;"[22] while Coe places *Wheel* alongside *WWWVY* as a "kind of dance-theater of cruelty," which recycles *WWWVY*'s "quintessential cartoon characters."[23]

Specifically, *Wheel* re-presents Tharp's nightmarish take on American domesticity through theatrical, narrative segments in which a "nuclear family" is shown in a number of compromising and disquieting situations and relations. Further, *Wheel* includes a dancing "Greek chorus" which punctuates the dramatic action while occasionally alluding to Saint Catherine and her martyrdom in pursuit and defense of a spiritual ideal. Finally, *Wheel* ends with Tharp's choreographic tour de force, "The Golden Section," which features acrobatic, aerobic, aerial, and symbiotic movement (performed by dancers in gold against a golden background) and represents an apotheosis in which abstract, pure dance redeems an ugly, cruel, apocalyptic world.[24] All of these components comprise a ballet to which the "dance theatre" moniker has been applied -- sometimes in a laudatory fashion and, in other times, the pejorative -- with much attention paid to the work's contentious narrative, grotesque dramatics, and dense allegorical/conceptual elements (e.g., the mysterious, metaphoric "pineapple" which periodically appears throughout the narrative, inciting greed, lust, angst, and violence). Jowitt proclaimed *Wheel* to be "a dance-theater piece so huge-scaled, so active, so fierce, so densely layered and cross-referenced that you sit in your seat hardly able to move;"[25] while Saal (somewhat echoing the "Broadway" criticism lobbed at

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[18] Regarding *WWWVY*'s unique theatrical/dramatic construct, Coe offers an illuminative description: "The text became a kind of radio play, with a child actress and Babe himself reading from a platform high above the stage. The dansical traces Jane's [the mother's] mock-picaresque adventures [. . .], her fugitive sexuality and drinking, and boisterous rows that finally are not all that comical." Coe, *Dance in America*, 219. It should also be noted that Tharp alternated with company member Sara Rudner in the role of the mother, Jane, in the original Winter Garden production.

[19] Writing in 1985, Coe's "dansical" designation for *WWWVY* is one of the earliest uses of the term by a concert dance or theatre scholar/historian.

[20] Coe, *Dance in America*, 218. Coe's italics.

[21] Quoted in Coe, *Dance in America*, 219.

[22] Deborah Jowitt, "Tharp against the Whirlwind," *Village Voice*, September - October, 1981, reprinted in *The Dance in Mind* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985), 57.

[23] Coe, *Dance in America*, 222.

[24] Today, "The Golden Section," excerpted as "Five Golden Sections," has become a popular and critically acclaimed concert piece for Tharp, commissioned by numerous dance companies.

[25] Jowitt, "Tharp against the Whirlwheel," 57.

Chapters) summarily declared the work to be, "in deference to Broadway, [. . .] more concerned with theater than dance," disparaging it as "grotesque, amateurish, bitter and blackly clownish."[26]

As evidenced by Saal's description, some critics specifically lamented *Wheel*'s theatrical thrust and scope, often asserting that its dramatic narrative jeopardized and convoluted its dance power and potential. In her *Christian Science Monitor* review, Nancy Goldner surmised: "One wonders if she's [Tharp] not sacrificing too much dance invention at the altar of the story."[27] Concurrently, *New York Times*' Anna Kisselgoff lamented the use of "commentary" in *Wheel*, concluding, "At present, Miss Tharp lacks considerable depth in her messages."[28] Yet, the overall weakness of Tharp's libretto (and theatricalization, thereof) did not completely undermine *Wheel*; for the work was still positioned by Tharp, and considered by most critics, to be a concert piece, defined, dominated, and distinguished by its universally praised dance/choreography. In short, Coe asserts that "the point" of *Wheel* was not "Tharp's anger and the astounding complexity of her allegory," but, instead, the "blazing river" of "ceaseless dancing [. . .] blasted along by [. . .] David Byrne's music and lyrics."[29]

Here, I must address, due to my positioning of *Wheel* as a "dansical" antecedent to *Movin' Out*, the above-referenced score by pop/rock musician David Byrne, former lead of the New Wave band, Talking Heads. As will be illustrated, Tharp approached, commissioned, and "collaborated" with Byrne in much the same manner that she worked with pop musician Billy Joel on *Movin' Out*. When Tharp decided to explore a possible collaboration with Byrne as composer, lyricist, and recording artist of *Wheel*'s original score, she embarked upon a process in which she *choreographically compiled and directed the score*. She recounts: "I worked with my dancers and some of the old Talking Heads numbers, and then I asked David to come in and look at it and see if it made sense to work with me."[30] In a *New York Times* article, Robert Palmer reported on their "collaborative," yet often dance-directed, method: "Some of the pieces were written more or less to order, to go with dance movements Miss Tharp had already worked out; other pieces generated dance movements."[31] The resultant score, with its 23 separate pieces of music, was recognized to be a significant aspect of the production; yet, in concert-dance fashion, this component was still relegated to the background, in a recorded state, while the dancing dominated and dictated the overall work.

Thus, although *Wheel* was seen as the progeny of *WWWVY* and often designated as "dance theatre" (per its dramatic narrative and original score), the work was, nevertheless, positioned by Tharp as concert dance/ballet and acquiescently read as such by dance and theatre authorities. Unlike *WWWVY*, the term "dansical" was never applied to *Wheel*, and there were no "musical theatre" allusions/designations made -- possibly because many critics found themselves confounded in their estimations and summations of *Wheel*. Voicing the opinions of others before him, Coe anthologizes *Wheel* as a "flawed, infuriating masterpiece."[32] Yet, such a "flawed" work merits serious "dansical" consideration as it predates and foreshadows *Movin' Out*, containing a similar methodology, construct, and aesthetic by its auteur, as well as inciting analogous criticisms, justifications, and/or equivocations within the theatre/dance community. In 1981, Palmer proclaimed that *Wheel* represented "a first" for modern dance on Broadway; [33] more importantly, he predicted, "It will not be the last of its kind."[34]

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[26] Saal, "Dance as Slouch and Twitch," 104.

[27] Nancy Goldner, "New Twyla Tharp Work Bites Off More than It Can Dance," *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 September 1981, 19.

[28] Anna Kisselgoff, "Twyla Tharp's Growing Pains," *New York Times*, 4 October 1981, 2:10.

[29] Coe, *Dance in America*, 222.

[30] Quoted in Robert Palmer, "A 'Talking Head' Collaborates with Twyla Tharp," *New York Times*, 20 September 1981, 2:17.

[31] Palmer, "A 'Talking Head' Collaborates with Twyla Tharp," 2:17.

[32] Coe, *Dance in America*, 225.

[33] Tharp continued to revisit *Wheel* throughout her career, first directing a 1982 television version for BBC which aired on PBS as part of the *Dance in America* series in 1983. Tharp shortened the production a bit but also added a computer-generated figure of St. Catherine to

Palmer's conjecture was indeed prescient; for although it took two decades,[35] Tharp ultimately debuted another *Wheel*esque production on Broadway: *Movin' Out*. Specifically, like *Wheel*, this Tharpian foray features a pop/rock score and musician collaboration/commission; a sociopolitical narrative (by Tharp) imposed upon the score; and Tharp's self-expressive control and domination of the overall work as she conceptualized and directed the production, predominantly relying upon her signature choreography and concert dance aesthetic/construct to theatrically convey her tale. Yet, in terms of authorial intent and reception, *Movin' Out* differs crucially from *Wheel*. Upon its Broadway debut at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on October 24, 2002, the work was classified by Tharp (and validated by the theatre community) as a "musical" (as opposed to a "ballet"), placed firmly within the musical theatre genre and intended for its audience. In other words, *Movin' Out* was deemed a "dansical."

The road to Broadway was a bit rocky, however. And from *Movin' Out*'s earliest conception and throughout its theatrical run, Tharp played the role of all-powerful, self-expressive auteur -- recognized, criticized, and lauded as such by authorities and mediators in the theatre community. After approaching Billy Joel with the idea of using his song catalogue as a compilation/"jukebox" score for her musical told entirely through dance, Tharp proceeded to write another sociopolitical "coming-of-age" narrative to illustrate Joel's songs. After recruiting a prestigious cast of dancers (mostly culled from professional ballet companies), the 8-million-dollar production embarked on a Chicago tryout, during which it received overwhelmingly negative reviews. Emblematic of Tharp's self-expressive proclivities was her response to the work's less-than-auspicious debut and reception. For instance, *New York Post*'s Michael Riedel, who placed the blame "squarely on the shoulders" of Tharp, reported: "She rifled through Joel's backlist to come up with a storyline on which to pin his songs. [. . .] Critics suggested that the show needed a professional book writer and maybe even a new director. But that was not going to happen. Tharp [. . .] will not [. . .] stand for anyone else trying to fix her show."[36]

Indeed, in almost every aspect, Tharp is the primary and ultimate author of *Movin' Out*. According to Riedel, she originally insisted her billing read "created by Twyla Tharp" but settled for "conceived, choreographed and directed by"[37] after being pressed by producers to acknowledge Joel's "substantial" contribution.[38] Yet, Tharp has suggested that her libretto (as she self-expressively, choreographically redefines it) is the musical's communicative force. She describes *Movin' Out* as "a story told without language." She expounds, "Yes, there are Billy's lyrics, but it's told through a different medium. [. . .] The movement and the action tell the story."[39] Significantly, Tharp is also the literal librettist of *Movin' Out*. Along with choreography, she supplied the written dance narrative which details the tumultuous triangle of Brenda, Eddie, and Tony, and the gentler, bittersweet romance of James and

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illustrate her allegorical reference to the Saint; she also elucidated the work's imagery and themes through a preceding on-camera interview. In 1987, she presented *The Catherine Wheel III*. Shortened to 40 minutes, this version removed or condensed many of the narrative family segments, while keeping the entire "Golden Section" intact.

[34] Palmer, "A 'Talking Head' Collaborates with Twyla Tharp," 2:17.

[35] In the intervening years between *Wheel* and *Movin' Out*, Tharp furthered her prolific, expansive, and prestigious career. In 1988, her company, Twyla Tharp Dance, merged with ABT; while Tharp, herself, continued to independently choreograph for ABT, along with other companies such as NYCB, British Royal Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Company, and Hubbard Street Dance. By the 1990s, along with having created approximately 100 concert works, she had choreographed five films: *Hair* (1978), *Ragtime* (1980), *Amadeus* (1984), *White Nights* (1985), and *I'll Do Anything* (1994), as well as directed/choreographed the Broadway version of *Singin' in the Rain* in 1985 (interestingly, the film/theatre productions, other than *Hair*, contained little of Tharp's "signature" choreography). In addition, Tharp also reestablished Twyla Tharp Dance in the '90s, successfully touring the company from 1999 to 2003.

[36] Michael Riedel, "Billy Joel's Blues," *New York Post*, 24 July 2002, 50.

[37] It is significant to note that the billing of "conceived, choreographed, and directed by" was somewhat controversially introduced to Broadway in 1957 by the pioneering auteur Jerome Robbins who insisted upon the title/credit in all publicity and program materials for *West Side Story*.

[38] Riedel, "Billy Joel's Blues," 50.

[39] Quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, "Mutual Admiration Society," *Playbill* (30 November 2002), 10.

Judy -- all set against a backdrop of Vietnam, as well as its repercussions throughout the remainder of 1970s and early '80s. As *Dancing Times*' George Dorris summarized, "As three blue collar young men go off to Vietnam, only two [Tony and Eddie] return, emotionally scarred, to slowly heal and become ready to *move out*."[40] Although Tharp has said that she finds *Movin' Out*'s narrative "difficult to talk about," she has, nonetheless, named her libretto's three main themes and developments: first is a "post-World War II idealism;" then, the intervening Vietnam War and its "corrosive effect [. . .] on our national ethos;" and, finally, Act Two's "survival" which entails "the belief that the cup is half full, not half empty."[41]

Here, one might see *Movin' Out* as Tharp's latest edition in her narrative dance-theatre series (beginning with *Chapters/Verses*), as she again supplied a libretto that critically depicts, interrogates, and deconstructs American myths and ideals. In a 2003 interview, Tharp traced her evolution towards narrative dance and libretto authorship, recounting that she entered the concert arena in the late '60s being "nonnarrative." But with an awareness "that there was a big element missing" and in an attempt to "reach an audience emotionally," she recalls making "some [storytelling] attempts [. . .] in the '70s." By 1988, she had enrolled in a screenwriting class at Columbia University.[42] Once Tharp chose to concentrate on the craft/art of storytelling and drama, she applied these lessons to *Movin' Out*. Specifically, she cites a textbook, Aristotelian dramatic arc when describing her libretto, stating that her "goal" was to make audiences feel that they, along with her characters, have "made a progression. [. . .] There's an old-fashioned word for it. It's 'catharsis.'"[43] Yet, there were some detractors in regards to the dramatic efficacy and immediacy of her libretto; for instance, in his review, Clive Barnes posited that *Movin' Out*'s book "is familiar to the point of seeming simplistic," pointedly concluding, "If a story is too silly to speak, then sing it; and if it's too silly to sing, then dance it."[44]

In this respect, *Movin' Out* again echoes *Wheel*, as Tharp's libretto was seen by some as a weak element which somewhat proved a disservice to her recognized area of expertise and authority: choreography/dance. Yet, this time, Tharp was seemingly able to redress this criticism by framing an argument (supported by the formidability of her concert dance persona) that ironically agreed with and built upon Barnes' glib complaint regarding her "silly" story. Defending her choice to dance "it" (i.e., *Movin' Out*'s narrative), Tharp has argued: "There is obviously a power and a truth in action that doesn't lie, which words easily can do." She concludes that her dance/choreography for *Movin' Out* represents the ultimate "truth on the stage. [. . .] In this case there is more power to our physical reality than to dialogue."[45] And, for the most part, Tharp won the day as most prominent critics not only affirmed but also applauded Tharp's position that her libretto was most potent in its use of dance/choreography (sans spoken word) to communicate the story and convey the characters' emotional journeys. Even skeptics became converts and advocates. Specifically, Jowitt, who initially "doubted" Tharp's attempt at "narrative" in *Movin' Out*, stating that it had never been her "strong suit," came away "exhilarated" by the production and its "bold choreographer's vision."[46] And although Kisselgoff concurred with Barnes that Tharp's libretto sounded "familiar" if one remembered "films like *The Deer Hunter*," she ultimately extolled, "The idea here is that the how is more important than the what. Dance can express what words cannot."[47] Alluding to Tharp's concert dance affiliation and reconfirming her choreographic assertion,

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[40] George Dorris, "Twyla Tharp's *Movin' Out*," *Dancing Times* (January 2003), 31. Dorris' emphasis.

[41] Quoted in Rothstein, "Mutual Admiration Society," 14.

[42] Quoted in Fletcher Roberts, "How Twyla Tharp Learned to Tell a Tale," *New York Times*, 1 June 2003, 2:10.

[43] Quoted in Rothstein, "Mutual Admiration Society," 14.

[44] Clive Barnes, "A *Movin'* Ballet -- Tharp's Choreography Takes Center Stage," *New York Post*, 25 October 2002, 47.

[45] Quoted in Roberts, "How Twyla Tharp Learned to Tell a Tale," 2:10.

[46] Deborah Jowitt, "Showcasing Heroes," *Village Voice*, 5 November 2002, 61.

[47] Anna Kisselgoff, "The Story Is in the Steps," *New York Times*, 25 October 2002, 1:4.

Brantley wrote in his *Times* review that "Tharp uses the basic story in the way choreographers of storybook ballets used fairy tales," while elaborating that "the dancers' movements [. . .] keep uncovering deeper emotional levels." Finally, regarding her choreographic rendering of five friends moving from their high school "glory days" through "the Vietnam war and its long hangover," Brantley found allegorical, symbolic significance in the production's overall physicality: "*Movin' Out* vibrates with a riveting uneasiness. The show translates the subliminal anxiety you always feel watching dancers onstage [. . .] into a study of characters who cannot find equilibrium."[48] Dorris specifically accorded Tharp's dance/choreography a significant degree of potency and efficacy as her wide-ranging, ever-changing movement conveyed plot, mood, and character (e.g., the "rolling and pantomime" used for the battle scenes and the "rough-and-tumble break-dance moves" used to depict Eddie's "alienation" and descent into violent sex and drugs).[49]

Still, there were resistors to this self-expressive choreographic-cum-narrative strategy, given Tharp's musical theatre positioning/posturing of the work. Writing in 2004, Barry Singer proclaimed that he did not understand the critical "delirium" surrounding *Movin' Out*, citing the deficient dance narrative as a major culprit. Specifically, he posited that the "nearly constant motion" and "breathless" pace of the production "would have been fine if *Movin' Out* simply was a twitchy piece of movement," concluding: "Unfortunately, Tharp felt compelled to tell ticket buyers a story for their hundred bucks [. . .]. The results were a travesty of both the war itself and the decade that was torn apart by it."[50]

Regarding this "travesty" of a libretto, a fascinating development ensued in 2003 when Tharp submitted *Movin' Out* to the Pulitzer committee for consideration. Riedel detailed the process in a *New York Post* article:

> At one point, sources say, the producers considered submitting just the lyrics, but decided they needed something meatier. So they came up with a booklet blending photographs, lyrics, and plot synopsis. The left-hand pages feature photos illustrating the ballet, scene by scene. The right-hand pages consist of Joel's lyrics, printed alongside a plot synopsis written by Tharp.[51]

The "musical" did not win the prize; but efforts made toward its consideration in the "drama" category -- given its absence of dialogue or textual narrative spoken onstage -- illuminates the degree of theatrical merit and legitimization bestowed the Tharp dansical. Yet, it may also give one pause as to the ultimate dissolution of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* music/text/dance ideal that had once defined and delineated the American musical, along with the validation of a dance-dominant archetype that may now be considered to constitute "musical theatre," with a "book" choreographically redefined and reconfigured. Yet, there were (and are) many theatre critics who accepted Tharp's dansical redefinition/re-conception of a libretto; in particular, Riedel wrote: "Anybody who argues that *Movin' Out* doesn't have a book is being a stick-in-the-mud. Its story is clear; its characters complex; its emotions true."[52]

The narrative, however, is not the only choreographically dictated and, possibly, compromised musical theatre component of *Movin' Out*; for Tharp also directorially/choreographically compiled and controlled the score, choosing works from Joel's canon to suit her theme, concept, libretto, and movement. As *Playbill's* Mervyn Rothstein documented in 2002, Tharp's initial plan "was to use Joel's

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[48] Brantley, "In a Top 40 State of Mind," 1:3.

[49] Dorris, "Twyla Tharp's *Movin' Out*," 31.

[50] Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause, 2004), 258.

[51] Michael Riedel, "Eye on the Prize," *New York Post Online Edition*, 7 March 2003, http://www.nypost.com/cgi-bin/printfriendly.pl (accessed March 7, 2003).

[52] Riedel, "Eye on the Prize," http://www.nypost.com/cgi-bin/printfriendly.pl (accessed March 7, 2003).

music in conjunction with her own vision of a crucial period in American history."[53] Consequently, as Tharp recounted to Rothstein, she embarked upon a process that was eerily redolent of her *Wheel* "collaboration" with Byrne, stating that after she thought of using Joel's music, she tried it out with several of her dancers to see "if it was a doable idea [. . .]. Then I called Billy."[54] Ultimately, the production's musical component consisted of a "piano man" (Michael Cavanaugh in the original Broadway cast) and a band of nine musicians who performed the Tharp-selected Joel numbers. Yet, this "live" musical component did not seemingly veer that far from a "canned" score, in that the pianist/vocalist most often replicated, in style, tone, and interpretation, Joel's recorded versions of the songs. This phenomenon was not missed by many critics; in 2004, Ethan Mordden described Cavanaugh, at the grand piano on an upper platform, as "performing the numbers with the sharp attack and confidence of the Piano Man [Joel] himself;"[55] while Singer somewhat disparaged *Movin' Out*'s overall musical element as one comprised of "reconstituted Billy Joel hits performed by a Billy Joel impersonator."[56]

Regardless of the "jukebox" and mimetic character of *Movin' Out*'s score and vocal performance, most critics lauded the production's musical component. Brantley went so far as to insist that the production did not rely upon "what might be called the karaoke quotient." Although he described Cavanaugh as a "Billy Joel-soundalike," he also deemed him to be a "remarkably accomplished pianist" whose singing contains "a self-contained polish [. . .] that does not encourage theatergoers to join in."[57] In addition, many applauded the Joel compositions; specifically, Barnes claimed that Joel's music was "essential to Tharp's concept,"[58] while Jowitt concurred: "Joel's songs [. . .] are the launching pad for Tharp's story and provide the evening's only words, igniting details that dancing -- so good at emotional subtext -- can't deal with."[59]

Of course, these songs were still hand-picked by Tharp and compiled/configured to suit her choreographic narrative. It must also be noted that her choreography/dance was often cited as the music's embodiment and extension; therefore, it was ultimately credited for the score's communicative power and efficacy. In addition, the Broadway stage design for *Movin' Out* placed the "piano man" and band on an upstage platform, physically separate from the dancing action, resulting in the musical element being relegated to the background (with an aural effect somewhat redolent of a film score); while the dancers viscerally ruled the dominant downstage performance space. Significantly, Barnes' *Movin' Out* review headline read: "Tharp's Choreography Takes Center Stage;"[60] while Kisselgoff elaborated:

> The best choreographers have repeatedly revealed new dimensions to composers in their own music. [. . .] Ms. Tharp's genius is to give the public a recognizable Billy Joel; [. . .] but her virtuosic and emotionally charged dances are anything but a mere visualization of his lyrics or rhythms. The dancing dominates the show.[61]

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[53] Rothstein, "Mutual Admiration Society," 10.

[54] Ibid., 14.

[55] Ethan Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 256.

[56] Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, 258.

[57] Brantley, "In a Top 40 State of Mind," 1:3.

[58] Barnes, "A *Movin'* Ballet -- Tharp's Choreography Takes Center Stage," 47.

[59] Jowitt, "Showcasing Heroes," 61.

[60] Barnes, "A *Movin'* Ballet -- Tharp's Choreography Takes Center Stage," 47.

[61] Kisselgoff, "The Story Is in the Steps," 1:4.

All of which reaffirms my characterization of the dansical as a musical theatre work that is both dance-defined and dominated by a self-expressive choreographer. In the case of Tharp and *Movin' Out*, these defining qualities were not only revered by many in the dance/theatre community, but also reverentially reinscribed. Prior narrative/character ballets by Tharp (e.g., *Deuce Coup* and *Wheel*) were often cited by critics as precursors to *Movin' Out*, while many authoritative voices in the media alerted audience members to the signifying and proprietary concert dance history and stamp of the work's auteur. For example, Kisselgoff denoted:

> As is customary with Ms. Tharp, the choreography nonetheless blends the classical and the vernacular. [. . .] The vocabulary, however, is pure Tharp. [. . .] Here is the old Tharp signature style, full of spirals and swinging arms. [. . .] Nobody but classically trained dancers[62] could even begin to cope with the superhuman partnering and stamina required by this choreography.[63]

Of course, it may be expected that the leading *New York Times* dance critic would spotlight and address this aspect of *Movin' Out*; yet, theatre critics also found themselves describing and referencing the signature choreography of Tharp. For instance, Brantley felt that the dance/choreography adroitly and potently carried the production, citing Tharp's "wide-ranging physical vocabulary that quotes everything from *Swan Lake* to Michael Jackson's moonwalk."[64] Concordantly, *Daily News*' Howard Kissel wrote that *Movin' Out*'s movement could veer "within a phrase or two [. . .] from the lyrical classical style into the angular, libidinal, athletic movements for which Tharp is known."[65] In short, most critics and scholars from the musical theatre and concert dance arenas unreservedly applauded the self-expressive choreographic domain asserted by Tharp on Broadway -- that is, the liminal dansical space in which concert dance morphs into a new configuration of "musical," while legitimizing and celebrating its self-expressive choreographic/dance legacy and evolution. Mordden specifically asserted Tharp's Broadway dance achievement:

> Twyla Tharp is an outstanding name in ballet, but this is Broadway's first experience of what Tharp does when she is free to do it [. . .]. Many have failed to appreciate how sleekly Tharp has blended ballet with the thing we have no word for yet that denotes what happened to hoofing after Balanchine, de Mille, and Robbins adopted it.[66]

Given this dance dominance and self-expressive authority/authorship, one must continue to question, however, whether *Movin' Out* represents the musical theatre *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the ideal, that is, with its inherent, interactive, and uniquely invigorative triumvirate of music, text, and dance). Interestingly, Tharp, having done her homework regarding drama and libretto construction, describes her overall composition and direction of *Movin' Out* in *Gesamtkunstwerk* terms, referring to "dramatic arcs" and musical theatre integration. Specifically, she recounts that the production had to "be paced musically, so that it has its builds and its climaxes and its drop down and ease off," along with similarly structured "character arcs" which need to be woven "with the music structure."[67] Reportedly, Tharp had some initial

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[62] For the original Broadway production, Tharp recruited ABT's John Selya and Keith Roberts to play, respectively, Eddie and Tony; Elizabeth Parkinson (having formerly danced with Joffrey Ballet, Feld Ballet, and Donald Byrd) portrayed Brenda; while ABT's Ashley Tuttle and NYCB's Benjamin Bowman were cast as Judy and James. Along with Tharp's concert credentials, the aforementioned classical company affiliations of these dancers were almost always cited in critical reviews.

[63] Kisselgoff, "The Story Is in the Steps," 1:4.

[64] Brantley, "In a Top 40 State of Mind," 1:3.

[65] Howard Kissel, "A B'way State of Mind," *Daily News*, 25 October 2002, 61.

[66] Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical*, 256.

[67] Quoted in Roberts, "How Twyla Tharp Learned to Tell a Tale," 2:10.

difficulty integrating her dance-dominant vision with the musical score in order to suggest, in praxis, any sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Tharp, herself, recalls that during a Chicago preview, "a friend of mine sat next to a woman who was watching the show like this. [Ms. Tharp covers first her eyes and then ears, moving back and forth between the two.] She said, 'I like it very much; I just don't know how to get my information.'" Tharp claims that she solved these contradictions by "remixing" the dance/music/narrative elements for the Broadway production.[68] Yet, did she truly create a work redolent of the musical theatre *Gesamtkunstwerk*? Most critics, noting the work's overall concert dance aesthetic and constitution, would answer, "No." In the same breath, however, they celebrated *Movin' Out*'s "dance-redefined" reconfiguration of this traditional musical archetype. Brantley came closest to fully according Tharp's choreographic/dance domain a dramatic, integrationist status, writing that Tharp's numbers "internalize the score," as her dances "become shaded personality sketches, expressing individual reactions to mass-marketed music."[69] Others were more critical of the shortcomings unavoidable in such a dance-centric setting. Kissel, writing from a traditional theatre perspective, lamented the overtaxing and overexposure of *Movin' Out*'s dancers who, in a "normal musical," could share the stage with "the book scenes or the purely vocal moments."[70] Dorris offered a more pointed criticism -- while continuing to credit the dance as the production's redeeming factor:

> My reservations stem from the difficulties of establishing full characters and plot through movement alone, since the music sets the mood rather than revealing these people through song. [. . .] The story becomes primarily an occasion for hearing these songs and watching the dances. Fortunately, Tharp's choreography and her splendid dancers take us to a level where these other concerns scarcely matter.[71]

All of which leads back to a "dansical" reception paradigm in which the application of the term "musical" (along its implied *Gesamtkunstwerk* construct/aesthetic) to a dance-theatre work on Broadway causes confusion, contemplation, and controversy amongst its readers. Yet, Tharp, again, found a way to defuse any such "moniker" angst. Although the production was created, positioned, and marketed as a Broadway musical, she opted to remove and/or redraft any terminology which could possibly call attention to the inherent contradictions and complications of a ballet redefined and repositioned as a musical. Specifically, during the Chicago tryout, Tharp shortened the production's original title of *Movin' Out: The Musical* to *Movin' Out*. Tharp recounts that "the word 'musical' was causing a lot of confusion;" so she decided to "just forgo any categories and simply call it *Movin' Out*," preferring the abbreviated title because "in terms of genre [. . .], it's going to follow new rules."[72] Regardless of allusions to a "new" genre, however, "concert dance" labels and references continued to inform and frame *Movin' Out*, even amongst its champions. For instance, although Winer declared at *Movin' Out*'s Broadway debut that "it's that time again -- time to shake and bake definitions of a Broadway show," she also lauded the "concert dance" work, summarizing that it was "probably the best anti-war ballet since Kurt Joos' 1930's *The Green Table*."[73] Tellingly, Jowitt reported that *Movin' Out*'s audiences "rose [. . .] to cheer this . . . what? Dansical?;"[74] while Barnes bluntly declaimed: "They can call [. . .] *Movin' Out* a

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Brantley, "In a Top 40 State of Mind," 1:3.

[70] Kissel, "A B'way State of Mind," 61. Kissel's italics.

[71] Dorris, "Twyla Tharp's *Movin' Out*," 31.

[72] Quoted in Roberts, "How Twyla Tharp Learned to Tell a Tale," 2:10.

[73] Winer, "A Movin' Dancical of Waste of War, Power of Art," http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/stage/ny-c2977115oct25.story (accessed October 30, 2002).

[74] Jowitt, "Showcasing Heroes," 61.

musical until they're blue in the face. But if it looks like a ballet, sounds like a ballet, feels like a ballet and dances like a ballet -- it is a ballet."[75] Kisselgoff concurred, definitively declaring that the "contemporary ballet," *Movin' Out*, is not "a musical, newfangled or otherwise, just because it is produced on Broadway. There is no dialogue, the dancers don't sing and the lyrics are sometimes irrelevant to the dancing."[76] Finally, Richard Zoglin devoted a significant portion of his *Time* review to the production's liminal and paradoxical nature: "You can spend a lot of time trying to decide exactly what to call *Movin' Out*. [. . .] It's not a traditional musical because none of the main characters say a word -- or even sing. [. . .] Maybe just compare it with previous dance pieces Tharp has done to popular music . . . . But then what's it doing on Broadway?"[77]

In response to Zoglin, *Movin' Out* is on Broadway because Twyla Tharp put it there. And, yes, one should compare the production with Tharp's previous dance pieces, while making a crucial distinction: *Movin' Out* is a not another "ballet," but a "musical." Why? Because she said so . . . and, equally important, because her readers concurred. After 1,303 performances, nine Tony Award nominations (including a nomination for Best Musical and a win for Best Choreography), *Movin' Out* closed on December 11, 2005. In the final analysis, the contentions and criticisms incited by *Movin' Out*'s paradigm of ballet/musical amalgamation and redefinition proved somewhat toothless; for the critical (and popular) "pass" given its dance-centric mutation of the musical theatre genre signified a new era of legitimacy and potentiality for dansical. Accordingly, Barnes asserted in 2004 that *Movin' Out* set a "new benchmark" for the dance musical, while alluding to its broader significance: "Movin' in or *Movin' Out*, these are great days for -- might we call it? -- the dansical!"[78] This sentiment was, no doubt, inspired and exemplified by Tharp, whose authoritative and meditative concert dance voice on Broadway loudly proclaimed and positioned the controversial and confounding dansical as a potent, provocative, and newly proven form of the American musical.

[75] Barnes, "A *Movin'* Ballet -- Tharp's Choreography Takes Center Stage," 47.

[76] Kisselgoff, "The Story Is in the Steps," 1:4.

[77] Quoted in Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, 295.

[78] Barnes, "Attitudes," 98. It should be noted that Barnes may have spoken too soon in heralding a great new age for the dansical; for no significant dansical has debuted on Broadway since *Movin' Out*. Furthermore, Tharp, herself, moved away from the dansical form with her Broadway follow-up in 2006: *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Although this production somewhat resembles *Movin' Out* in that it again features a song catalogue by a contemporary musician (this time, Bob Dylan) and represents a self-expressive archetype, having been directed/choreographed/conceived by Tharp, it is not a dansical. Specifically, *The Times* uses dialogue to convey narrative and its characters are required to sing, as well as dance. Another major difference is that the show proved to be a disappointing failure for Tharp, closing after just 28 performances. Yet, given the tremendous critical and box office success of *Movin' Out* (as well as contemporaries *Fosse* and *Contact*), one sees the rationale behind Barnes' assertion; furthermore, it seems more than likely that the dansical will soon make a reappearance on Broadway.