



## Leotard Days

1965–1966

Judson Memorial Church, in the geographical center of Greenwich Village, stands like an exotic souvenir today on the southern edge of Washington Square Park, among the modern monoliths of New York University. Its Italian Renaissance-style ochre brickwork, ten-story campanile, and tile roofs link it to its neighbor across the park, Washington Square Arch—both were designed by the distinguished American architect Stanford White. The church has seventeen stained-glass windows by John La Farge and a bas relief altarpiece by Augustus St. Gaudens. It was declared a New York City landmark in 1966. The sanctuary has recently been restored to its turn-of-the-century beaux-arts splendor, a high, airy space of imposing beige marble Corinthian pillars; soaring vaults inset with vibrant arched and circular stained-glass windows; a paneled mansard ceiling; and a color scheme of beige, aqua, and cream to complement the marble wall panels.

Revisiting this beautiful house of light, it's hard to recall the way it looked when it was filled with rebellious performance events decades ago. In fact, at the end of the 1990s Judson's Baptist congregation agonized about whether to restore this grand space at all. According to senior minister Peter Laarman, Judson Church has always been more about ephemera than about preservation. Founded in 1890, the church was dedicated to serving the needs of the city. From immigrant job training programs and health cen-

ters to teenage sports, civil rights, antiwar protests, and gay-pride marches, the church has taken a leading role in New York's progressive dynamic. The showcasing of avant-garde dance events only extended its mission.

Beaux-arts architecture represented a form of cultural imperialism to the reformers of the 1960s. Over a period of time the walls, ceiling, and columns were painted a political dirt brown, though the altar and stained-glass windows remained. Regular Sunday services never ceased, but by 1966 the pews had been removed from the sanctuary to accommodate art happenings and Judson Dance Theater experiments. Judson Poets Theater held forth in the choir loft, next to the boxy old pipe organ with its pillars, carved wreaths, and trumpeting angels. Protest rallies shook the building and militants gathered outside to begin marches and demonstrations. For dance performances, the audience trudged up a set of creaky wooden stairs to the sanctuary. You came in under the choir loft, through a kind of low cavern, which was usually littered with a random assortment of thrift-shop chairs, props, piano, and equipment. Sometimes this "lobby" area was curtained off from the performance space.

On October 29, 1966, for the first of three concerts by Twyla Tharp and Company, chairs for the audience of about one hundred had been placed on three sides, facing away from the altar. Three pieces were on the program: *Re-Moves* (in four sections and two introductions), *Twelve Foot Change*, and a revival of Tharp's first work, *Tank Dive*, given only the year before in a small theater within the Hunter College art department. *Twelve Foot Change* was subsequently called *Yancey Dance*, after the music by jazz pianist Jimmy Yancey. *Re-Moves* was forty-five minutes long and had big ambitions.

Not that there was anything tentative about what Tharp had already done. Just out of college, she had danced for a season with Paul Taylor, then quit to find her own way. To earn money, she'd appeared for a summer at the Alaskan Pavilion of the New York World's Fair, dancing a "sort of furry hootchy-kootchy" in a bearskin rug. Following the approved modern dance practice of throwing out all that preceded one's own discoveries, Tharp's first two serious concerts encapsulated her idea of the basics, nonchalantly disguised in improper elements. After the eight-minute *Tank Dive*, which constituted the entire event at Hunter, she produced a second, slightly longer concert in the same small space. She made a twenty-minute film-dance, *Stride*, which was not intended for a live audience. The filmmaker, Robert Barry, had also documented *Tank Dive*, just as if it were a dance classic in need of preservation.

With hindsight, one could say she'd laid out all her major credentials in her first year: the talent, ego, and determination to make an individual style,

the embrace of popular culture, the fascination with film as a medium for both experimentation and preservation, and the pragmatic exploitation of whatever resources were available in order to create what she deemed worthy. At once a rebel and a puritan, Tharp embraced the avant-garde as an opportunity to experiment with ideas, not as an aesthetic or political statement. She had come from a deeply eccentric family; nonsense was perfectly all right with her. The oldest of four children, she had an ambitious mother who pushed her into improving studies from preschool age: piano, violin, viola, elocution, painting, German and French, baton twirling, and of course, dance lessons. She learned early how to schedule her time so as to get the most out of it, knocking off her school homework in the car as her mother drove her from their home near San Bernardino to classes in Los Angeles. On weekends she worked in the food concession of her mother's drive-in movie. Too busy taking lessons to have a teenage social life, she learned how to be an overachiever, a discriminating workaholic.

Nowadays, Tharp downplays her relationship to Paul Taylor, but her brief presence in his company came at an important time. Taylor in the early '60s was at a crossroads in his career. He'd started out with a dual citizenship in the commonwealth of modern dance, as a member of the Martha Graham Company and a dancer with Merce Cunningham. Taylor began doing his own choreography around 1958. He'd given a few notorious, dadaistic concerts and assembled the core of a company. *Aureole* (1962) scandalized the modern dance community at the American Dance Festival, not for its outrageousness but for its conservatism. A "white ballet" with formal, musical choreography to Handel, it affronted the expressionistic sensibilities that prevailed at the time. The next year he reverted to the bizarre and dissociated. *Scudorama* was just about finished when Tharp came into the company, and as a junior member she was given things to do that she considered beneath her. At one point she executed a slow, deranged somersault across the back of the stage, and at another she made an entrance under a beach towel, perched on the head of Dan Wagoner.

She says Taylor interested her as a dancer but not as a choreographer. After appearing in three other new works, *Party Mix*, *Junction*, and *Red Room*, she voiced her disapproval so loudly that he gave her what became a permanent leave of absence, advising her to go try doing her own work and see how easy it was. Taylor succeeded in molding his experimental impulses into a repertory and a company that were conventional enough to survive. Tharp faced a similar transition five years after her own initial borderline works.

In staging a concert at Judson Church, Tharp was treading on the turf of

the avant-garde dance community, but the concert was anomalous, both in Tharp's career and in the annals of Judson Dance. Tharp was quite aware of the symbolic significance of performing at Judson. After the concert was over, she says, "we had passed through the vale and come out whole . . . we had situated ourselves in the vanguard of the investigation into how dance could relate to and deal with our lives." Tharp was, and always would be, an independent. A tireless inventor of movement, she would try anything, but she wasn't drawn into the waves of communal dissatisfaction that flooded the dance world of the '60s. Her connection to Judson and to the avant-garde was her partner, Robert Huot, a visual artist and filmmaker. Huot had performed at Judson two years earlier in *War*, a collaborative performance piece with his friend, the artist Robert Morris. He designed the costumes and sets for all Tharp's dances from *Tank Dive* until they broke up in 1971.

Tharp's Judson program, on the surface, could have been any one of the avant-garde custard pies that were being pushed into the face of traditional dance at the time. Each of the three works presented a collage of incompatible elements. Unrelated things happened simultaneously. The audience was left to make its own sense of what it saw—or didn't see. The costumes for *Twelve Foot Change/Yancey Dance* consisted of long, hooded sweatshirts over leotards, with dark glasses and bare legs. *Twelve Foot Change* and *Tank Dive* lasted less than ten minutes each.

In *Tank Dive* Tharp, wearing heeled sandals and a leotard cut very low in back, spun a yo-yo out of her fist, bounced it once, and reeled it back. Stepping into a pair of three-foot planklike clogs, she slowly folded her body forward into an upside-down L, then straightened from her flat-back position into a forward lean. She stepped backwards out of the flippers and went up some steps onto a tiny stage. She stood for a long time in relevé, as perfectly posed as a ballerina, her legs turned out and spaced in a wide second position, her arms reaching out and up from her sides. She descended into a plié, rose again and held another relevé, in profile to the audience, absolutely motionless for another forty-four counts, the duration of a recording of Petula Clark's "Downtown."\*

\*In the Hunter performances, after Huot and Christopher Constance had sprinted into a collision, she returned for a series of violent somersaults and a sudden reiteration of her X-relevé pose. She recounts the scenario differently in her autobiography. It's unclear how much she edited the piece for Judson. By then even she had forgotten its original date—the program lists its premiere as 1964, a year before the real date, April 29, 1965.