



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

Following in her steps

A new visionary takes the lead and revives
Lee Theodore's AMERICAN DANCE MACHINE

One singular sensation: Rebecca Riker rehearses "The Music and the Mirror" from "A Chorus Line" in a workshop at the American Dance Machine.



ON THEATER

Linda Winer

linda.winer@newsday.com

Let's hear it for an idea whose time has come back. The American Dance Machine, which began life in 1976 and died some 10 years later along with its founder, Lee Theodore, was not like any other dance company. Neither a showcase for new choreographers nor a repository of classics, this one was dedicated to the preservation and perfor-

mance of a very specific kind of dancing — work that exists only in Broadway shows and, to a lesser extent, movie musicals.

Theodore (who played Anybodys in the original "West Side Story") called her mission a "living archive." What she really meant was that scripts, scores, designs and director's notes live on after a show closes. But the dance — often at least the equal of the other elements — lingers only in rough tapes and in the movement memories of the performers and choreographers. The dance parts in most scripts are simply marked "dance."

How thrilling, really, to hear

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the stirrings of a reborn American Dance Machine, one called ADM21 for its 21st century inspiration. Nikki Feirt Atkins — a trained dancer who, thanks to a severe eating disorder, went to medical school and became a pathologist — recognized the void and has taken action. Last November,

she trademarked the name. She incorporated in February. In March, she hired veteran choreographer Margo Sappington to be artistic director to her executive director.

They put together a studio performance in April and another in late June. That one had four pieces — including "Simply Irresistible" from Susan Stroman's "Contact" and Cassie's "Music and the Mirror" solo from "A Chorus Line," coached by Michael Bennett's original Cassie, Donna McKechnie. Robert La Fosse, who danced "Mr. Monotony" in "Jerome Robbins' Broadway," staged it here, while Sappington and Marge

Champion collaborated on a re-creation of Hermes Pan's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes."

"The time really is right for this," Sappington told me last week, mentioning the dance interest sparked by "Glee," "Smash" and all the gottadance TV contests. Besides, she says, "We've lost so many great choreographers in their prime."

Both Bennett and Bob Fosse died the same year (1987) as Theodore, and Tommy Tune hasn't had a major Broadway musical since the early '90s. And after decades of dance dol-

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drums, Broadway is enjoying a new generation of dance-driven director-choreographers, most of whom are expected to give master classes at the company's projected school.

The intention is not just to save dances for the company's programs. Broadway revivals can only benefit from dancers exposed to the contexts of the original shows. "The revivals are great," says Atkins, "but it would be wonderful for kids to have classes in the original period, to get contact with the original dancers. That would help shade and impart additional meaning."

These concerns are hardly news to Madeline Dempster, whose American Theater Dance Workshop in New Hyde Park began life in 1982 as the American Dancemachine, a Long Island partnership with Theodore. (In addition to the

school in Manhattan, there used to be another in Tokyo.)

"Our mission in theater dance is the same as Lee's," Dempster told me in an email during her Paris vacation. "To preserve the styles of Broadway theater dance so that it will be saved for future generations." Dempster met Theodore in 1980 and says "I was overwhelmed by her concepts" — to reconstruct the dances, to have a professional company to perform them and to have a school. She also conducted a summer intensive for more than 20 years at Hofstra. Atkins is aware of Dempster's work and plans to meet with her. "It's very exciting for me," Dempster adds.

Not everything was perfect with the Dance Machine. Production values tended to be modest and, sometimes, pieces that functioned wonderfully in a Broadway show did not withstand the close scrutiny of an individual concert spotlight.

Even at the early workshops, the new company is using costumes and live music. Sappington says she would even like to include "some of the dialogue that goes with the number, maybe a song to make the experience richer." She savors the memory of watching McKechnie coach the new dancer, "telling her to dig as deep as Michael had asked of her. You could hear Michael's voice in every word. Things that are so near and dear get lost over time. The vibration was so exciting."

Although Atkins and Sappington are using pickup artists now, the plan is to have a core of six to eight dancers augmented by guest artists. They are having conversations with several studios about where to start their school, which will be primarily for pre-professional and professional dancers. As Theodore did and Dempster still does, techniques will be based both in ballet and jazz-fusion, with different repertory from different decades and styles.

And, of course, there will be fundraising. Lots and lots of fundraising. Surely, the past and the future of Broadway dance are worth it.

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— NIKKI FEIRT
ATKINS, founder
and director,
American Dance
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