

Comfort, Humor, and Grace

by Susan Yung

JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY 40TH ANNIVERSARY RETROSPECTIVE | LA
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Heather Christian & David Neumann in *Faith Healing*. Photo: Robert Altman

Jane Comfort and Company's 40th Anniversary Retrospective demonstrated how the choreographer's work engages with audiences, while proving its wide-range and resistance to definition. The program is performed live by twenty-five former and current dancers, and incorporates well-produced video clips featuring interviews with the genial and witty Comfort. Her body of work to date has taken the shape of elegant, organic modern dance; word, gesture, and rhythm play; and social satire or political commentary that can include song and spoken text edging toward musical theater. Work by longtime creative partners Liz Prince (costumes) and David Ferri (lighting) shines in this overview directed by Comfort, with co-direction by Leslie Cuyjet and Sean Donovan.

Comfort earned a degree in studio art at UNC, then studied with Merce Cunningham, among others, and began creating work in 1978. Her work straddles post-modernism and also plotless, formal abstraction. In the retrospective, she generously shares her world with the audience, beginning with early video clips from the '80s that show her performing looping, grounded yet airy phrases of modern, and then cutting to clips where she is increasingly pregnant. Then she enters La MaMa with a man—the son she was carrying decades ago. “Time flies,” she notes, an apt prelude to the chronological series of ten excerpts taken from her oeuvre. She launches into *Four Screaming Women* (1982), in which four performers speak phrases (“Is that what you want?” “that’s wrong.”) linked with specific gestures, tics, or small movements—a raised fist, or slashing arms. The phrases accumulate possible meanings for viewers to parse, while building sections of movement. *Street Talk* (1984), in contrast, is a bright, bouncy dance to bongos that reflects its aerobics-era time. Cori Marquis and Javier Perez face off as if sparring, mirroring one another with little rabbit punches and quick skips in their Reeboks. At other times, the moves evoke the crisp vocabulary of cheerleading.

On video, Comfort speaks of her Southern upbringing and the complicated, and sometimes conflicting, social mores and prejudices that go with it. Fellow southerner Mark Dendy guests in *Faith Healing* (1993) as Amanda from Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, nailing the flirtatious and manipulative belle caricature. David Neumann joins him as the Gentleman Caller in a Superman t-shirt and mini cape, sweeping Amanda off her feet. In a separate scene with Heather Christian (Lois Lane), they reenact the scene from *Superman* in which he takes Lois for a flight. As they balance on stools on their stomachs, it is somehow no less thrilling than the CGI scene from the film.



Cori Marquis & Javier Perez in *Street Talk*. Photo: Maria Baranova

The political realm is ripe subject matter for Comfort, even if it has the psychological effect of pouring acid on a wound. Two excerpts recount the tabloid bait of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings. *S/He* (1995) flips the genders of Hill and Thomas, reframing the context and shock value of the subjects' statements; the questioning, and narration is spoken/sung by a chorus of four women who drum their fingers on a table to provide a rhythm and "speak" with arm gestures. They beat up and strip "Mr. Hill," who lies quaking in a fetal position as "Ms. Thomas" is confirmed. The effect of reversing genders underscores an imbalance of fair treatment while being squirm inducing.

Underground River (1998) is one of Comfort's most beloved works. It stars a tiny puppet person (by Basil Twist) brought to life by four puppeteers. The work's appeal is not only in the adorable puppet, who kicks its legs and "swims" through the air, but also in the intense teamwork and sense of community that the performers bring. Over the company's forty years, roughly 100 people have worked with Comfort. That community is key to *Asphalt* (2002), one of her most ambitious projects and a collaborative "opera" with Carl Hancock Rux and Toshi Reagon. Stephanie McKay sings a melodious recitative, supported by a dozen or so chorus members. This work suffers somewhat

from being excerpted; in its full-length iteration, it builds and sustains a dramatic arc and emotional dynamic that aren't truly conveyed from a brief section.

Two works of a less narrative and more kinetic nature follow. In *Altiplano* (2015), nine dancers interact: clustering, dispersing, rolling around one another, and then eventually falling into a grid. The patterning is dense and interlocking and for Comfort, relatively virtuosic, technically. *You Are Here* (2016) favors softer, more organic movements—waving arms resembling tree limbs, spins done on heels in front of a mesmerizing video of looming skyscrapers.

We're brought back to reality, and a waking nightmare (or dream, depending on your viewpoint), in the finale, *Amazing Grace* (2018), which uses audio from one of Trump's MAGA rallies and features a red hat on a mic stand as a visual gut punch. As his largely empty promises resonate through the theater, the entire company moves through a sign language version of "Amazing Grace." It manages to convey hope even as Trump is heard bellowing, "No more lies!" Who would have thought that theater, with its innate artifice, would prove to be far more real and relatable than reality? Such is life now, when the truth is more bizarre than fiction and it can be a balm to receive current events with a dash of Comfort.

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