“Jane Comfort is one of the most fertile minds in the theater of mixed forms.”

The New York Times
Representing a radical shift from Jane Comfort’s history of text-driven works, *Altiplano* is an abstract dance that originates in movement structures that range from spare images of the desert to highly physical and complex configurations, like a flash flood or violent winds. It references the evolution of animals and social communication with its gradually increasing physicality and hive-like density.

Comfort, Levasseur, and Wolcott, Bessie Award winners, were equal partners in creating the work, sharing and shifting design responsibilities as one. Jane Comfort is a choreographer, writer, and director who has broken boundaries in dance performance since the late 70’s.

The one-hour dance for seven performers premiered at La MaMa E.T.C. in the La MaMa Moves Festival in May 2015.

*Altiplano* was created with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Cultural Affairs as well as commissioning funds and a technical residency from the American Dance Institute.

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BEAUTY

Beauty is a dance theater work about the American notion of female beauty and the extremes that women go to achieve the more and more impossible beauty standards that are set by our culture. Beauty includes a Barbie beauty contest in which random members of the audience select that night's beauty queen. The movement vocabulary is derived from an investigation of Barbie's limited, robotic abilities (Barbie and Ken have an intimate encounter as only those two stiff jointed dolls can) contrasted with a fully expressive dance vocabulary. It addresses eating disorders, extreme plastic surgeries, Photoshopped images in the media, and the dancers' own personal beauty regimes. During the course of the evening, we become acquainted with the performers as Barbie dolls, as beauty contestants, as characters with beauty aspirations, and as the dancers behind all these personas. Beauty offers both a wickedly funny and poignant view of our compliance with the beauty industry.

Beauty is performed in repertory with the Bessie Award winning Underground River, which is an exploration of the rich fantasy life of a girl who appears to the outside world to be unconscious.

Beauty and Underground River present an evening in which one piece looks at outer beauty and the other at inner beauty, both complimenting and deepening each other's message.

Beauty was created with the support of a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant.

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Photos by Arthur Elgort and Christopher Duggan
Underground River, winner of a 1998 BESSIE Award as a "risk-taking and profound theatrical tour de force," is an exploration of the rich fantasy life of a girl who appears to the outside world to be unconscious. Singing a cappella songs by Toshi Reagon and interacting with the magical visual creations of master puppeteer Basil Twist, the dancers dwell in a world of magic realism and eccentric beauty unseen by those who wish to make her "well." Comfort looks at an inner world of play, song, and joy, contrasted with what we know to be the "real" world.

It was originally commissioned by the Jacob's Pillow/Pillow Work series in 1997. It premiered in 1998 at PS122 and has been performed since at venues throughout the US and Latin America. It is currently being performed in a shared evening with Beauty.

Underground River was created with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Harkness Foundation.

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Photos by Arthur Elgort and Christopher Duggan
JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

MISSION

JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY creates dance theater works that push the intersection of movement and language to a new form of theater. Called by the New York Times "a postmodernist pioneer in the use of verbal material in dance" and by The Village Voice "one of the most original choreographers on the downtown scene," artistic director Jane Comfort addresses contemporary social and cultural issues with compassion and wit. The company is an extraordinary group of dancers, actors, and singers whose multiple talents allow Jane Comfort to create deeply layered works utilizing a wide range of theatrical elements, from pure dance to chanted texts, a cappella singing, film, lip-syncing, cross dressing, acted scenes, and puppetry. The company creates theater in which transformation occurs through many voices.

BIOGRAPHY

JANE COMFORT is a choreographer, writer, and director known for issue-oriented works integrating text and movement. She grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and received her BA in painting at the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill. Since 1978 she has created almost 50 dance/theater works, many of them evening-length, that have been presented throughout the United States, in Europe, and in Latin America. She also works in theater and opera, and choreographed the Broadway musicals Passion, by Stephen Sondheim, and Amour, by Michel Legrand as well as Shakespeare in the Park's Much Ado About Nothing and the Off Broadway musical Wilder at Playwrights Horizons. In 2006 she choreographed Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Salome with Deborah Voigt in the title role.

She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2010, a BESSIE Award for Underground River in 1998, a Collaboration Award from the Coalition of Professional Women in the Arts and Media in 2006 for her collaboration with composer Joan La Barbara on Fleeting Thoughts, a Doris Duke Award for New Work in 2000, and a Habie Award for distinguished service to the arts from the University of North Carolina in 2003. Jane has been a board member of The Field since 1998 and was a founder of the Gender Project. She was the 2008 artist mentor to the Sugar Salon, which supports emerging female choreographers.

JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY has pioneered the possibilities of multidisciplinary dance since 1978 with dance/theater works that push the limit of what is normally considered dance or drama to achieve a new form of theater. These works have been produced throughout the United States, Europe, and in Latin America. Comfort’s work often comments on social and political issues and lately has focused on identity. Recent works include Beauty, which was created with a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship Award. Through the NEA’s American Masterpieces grant program and a National Performance Network commission, the company restaged its seminal Faith Healing, produced by the Joyce Theater, in 2010. An American Rendition, made in collaboration with Joan La Barbara and Steve Miller and commissioned by the National Performance Network and NYS Council on the Arts, was selected by both Thirteen WNET and Gay City News as Best of 2008 Performances. The company was one of only two American dance companies selected by Performing Americas to collaborate with a Latin American dance company in 2007 to create a new work. Other recent company works include Fleeting Thoughts, commissioned and produced by Danspace Project, with live music by Joan La Barbara; Persephone, commissioned by The Joyce Theater and NPN, with live music by Tigger Benford and visual design by Keith Sonnier; Asphalt, a dance/opera with book and lyrics by Carl Hancock Rux, vocal score by Toshi Reagon and instrumental score by DJ Spooky; and Underground River, with a vocal score by Toshi Reagon and visual effects by Basil Twist, for which Comfort won a Bessie Award.

The company has been presented by such venues as Lincoln Center, The Joyce Theater, PS 122, Off-Broadway at Classic Stage Company, Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, and DTW in New York, The American Center in Paris, Antwerp's de Singel Theater, Actors Theatre of Louisville, the International Festival of Londrina, Brazil, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, American Dance Festival, Bates Dance Festival, New Orleans’ Contemporary Art Center, DC's Dance Place, and many theaters and colleges across the US. Jane Comfort and Company has received the Doris Duke Award for New Work, fourteen grants and fellowships from the NEA, as well as support from Creative Capital Foundation, MAP Fund, NYSCA, the Fund for U.S. Artists, BUILD, the New England Foundation for the Arts, Arts International, the Mary Flagler Cary Foundation, American Music Center, Altoria Group, The Harkness Foundation for Dance, the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and many other organizations.
CRITICS QUOTES

"What I long to see in the world around me today is more of the "changeless basic material" used by all truly brave artists: the changeless basic material of passion. This is why it was so thrilling to see Jane Comfort and Company at the Joyce Theater last week."

The New York Times

"I've been rushing about to plays, concerts, dance, and last week, I saw art--ART--at Jacob's Pillow with Jane Comfort and Company."

The Berkshire Eagle

"The guiding spirits behind the theater of mixed forms are often choreographers. Theatrical directors may not be able to choreograph, but a dance-trained artist is used to conceiving the integration of movement with rhythm: the rhythm of music and even words, spoken or sung. That is what Jane Comfort, one of the most fertile minds in this genre, has realized so effectively."

The New York Times

"Few of Comfort's peers who are into dance drama have her gift for melding singing, vocalizing, speech and movement into an inseparable whole...Words, music and movement seethe together; united, their rhythms whirl the morsels of meaning into life stories."

The Village Voice

"Comfort has now developed a seamless choreographic style which easily bridges the integration of text with movement, acting, and song. She is without equal in this area."

International Dictionary of Modern Dance

"Jane Comfort stretches the limits of what is customarily meant by dance or drama to achieve a truly new form."

The Washington Post

"Jane Comfort is one of the most original choreographers on the downtown scene."

The Village Voice

"Jane Comfort, (is) a choreographer who's tackled political issues with passion and mordant wit...Aided by her splendid colleagues, Comfort stitches her disparate materials together with almost faultless theatrical skill."

The Village Voice
CRITIC’S QUOTES FOR *ALTIPLANO*

“Jane Comfort is a master teller of tales—not straight linear narratives, but dances that bristle with content—often social and/or political, often involving spoken text. She has always ingeniously layered and juxtaposed elements and viewpoints that might strike anyone else as incompatible and made them ignite one another.”

“Comfort...(who has made) this fascinating piece (a collaboration with composer Brandon Wolcott, lighting designer Joe Levasseur, costume designer Liz Prince, and seven marvelous performers) has tried, I think, to do something very difficult. *Altiplano* hovers and teases at the edges of abstraction, “meaning” shifting among the obvious, the enigmatic, and the hidden. Sometimes that interplay is disorienting, but mostly it draws you into a world that is both unfamiliar yet close to home.”

Deborah Jowitt, *The Arts Journal*

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

“*Altiplano*” is still a formal composition, beautifully arranged. The casualness of moments when dancers drop like ripe fruit, slapping the floor, contrasts with sections when they move in counterpoint with their energy contained and their limbs neatly folded.”

“Comfort has arranged a spectacular finale, with the dancers standing in a line across the far end of the space and watching us (silently calling to us?) through a curtain of rain.”

Robert Johnson, *The Dance Enthusiast*

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE
CRITIC'S QUOTES FOR BEAUTY

"The aptly named Comfort approaches the subject matter of her dances with gentle humor and nostalgia. Tiptoeing into areas where some might fear to tread - cosmetic surgery, a possibly comatose child - Comfort makes even Barbie a sympathetic character."

Janine Parker The Boston Globe
FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

"Fantastic and fascinating...Like the best of dance theater, "Beauty" isn't preachy. Instead Comfort creates a space for viewers to think about women, bodies and society while watching movement..."Beauty" is right on."

Rebecca Ritzel The Washington Post
FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

"It's a work of extremes — extreme appearances, extreme movement, and extreme discomfort as we observe how universally we are all implicated in the perpetuation of these unnatural ideals. Comfort's choreographic voice is articulate, insightful, and strong, and her medium (the dancers, movements, sounds, and visual elements of her work) communicates a series of messages that beg and deserve to be heard."

Anna Rogovoy The Rogovoy Report
FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

"The dramaturgy behind Jane Comfort's gimlet-eyed pageant in Beauty, on delicious display at Jacob's Pillow Doris Duke Theatre this past week, is spot-on. Petra van Noort is coached in the hyperfeminine lexicon of the catwalk. Svelte, young Lucie Baker has her body redrawn with a black marker to refine it for the plastic surgeon's scalpel. Leslie Cuyjet's glamorous image is Photoshopped, click after click, to refresh as thinner, taller, and whiter-skinned until the model is unrecognizable....seeing the work with a live audience was a revelation. Gasps and sighs around me conveyed that the facts of the soul-killing self-appraisal that has become part and parcel of the beauty trade are not all common knowledge."

Debra Cash The Boston Phoenix
FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE
CRITIC’S QUOTES FOR UNDERGROUND RIVER

The choreography is good, eclectic stuff, and in the end the cumulative elements coalesce into a poetic and touching image of a descent into nothingness...Poetry and drama come together poignantly.

Anna Kisselgoff The New York Times

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

“The gentle movements, patronizing tone of the psychiatrist's voice, toy-like flying fishes and the wee marionette the dancers charmingly manipulate fashion a touching child-like ambience. The dancers sing and move with a bouynace that is almost magical, they seem to transform the hard-surfaced floor into a pillowy cloud and hold the audience within their web.”

Phyllis Goldman Backstage

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

“In Underground River, Comfort puts to more delicate, sober uses her gift for the telling incongruity, for images that, brushed together, ignite thought...The deeper meanings of the piece emerge with stunning force from how Comfort juxtaposes words with actions.”

Deborah Jowitt The Village Voice

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

“The dancers perform Comfort’s breezy choreography, simple skips and softly generous leaps, with such delicate ease that you can imagine the grass beneath their feet. A tiny puppet, the creation of the puppeteer Basil Twist, is extracted from the cage of an umbrella that floats down to these dreamgirls. They manipulate its limbs, first in funny little marches and kicks, and then it soars, swims, and floats across the stage. The vision is playfully mysterious and achingly beautiful.”

Janine Parker The Boston Globe

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE

“In addition to how expertly she works in a multidisciplinary format, River is a testament to Comfort’s inventive use of text as a sound score.”

Anna Rogovoy The Rogovoy Report

FOR FULL REVIEW CLICK HERE
JANE COMFORT AND COMPANY

RESIDENCY ACTIVITIES

Jane Comfort and Company has an extensive history of working with colleges and universities through performance and education. The company teaches master classes in technique, composition, vocal techniques, language/text, and creating works with social commentary as well as pre and post show talks and public lectures about the work. The residency activities are often associated with the performance content and the presented work. For example, the themes of the company’s current work, Beauty, deal with female beauty standards and practices. Thus, the company is currently offering workshops in

- Media and fashion representations of young girls and adult women
- Body standards in various communities
- Eating disorders and physical health for dancers and non-dancers alike

Lecture/Demonstrations offer live performance or various scenes from the repertory, including video showings. This is followed with an informal discussion with the audience about the genesis of the work, how certain scenes were built, how a particular movement vocabulary became a metaphor for a social issue, how the text is laid into the movement, etc. A lecture/demonstration can be combined with an extended workshop in which participants develop their own performance piece based on social issues.

Performance Workshops focus on how to make a performance piece that deals with social issues. Warm up activities include acting and movement improvisations followed by discussions of structural options for performance and the social issues involved. Small groups or individuals develop short pieces that are shared with the group.

Movement Text Workshops introduce students to simple compositional techniques for voice and body. Students are given basic breath and vocal techniques to open up emotionally. The class then explores movement and text modules that are built into quick study structures.

Repertory Workshops introduces students to extended segments of the company’s work, with an emphasis on scenes that include both speaking and movement.

Question and Answer sessions and open dialogues are available with the audience both before and after performances.

The company is available to meet with women’s groups, gay alliances, women’s shelters and student organizations to discuss the gender and race issues involved in our work. The lecture/demonstration and performance workshop combination is particularly successful with high school and college students.
Jane Comfort’s America
by
Suzanne Carbonneau

“Art that cannot shape society and therefore also cannot penetrate the heart...is no art.”—Joseph Beuys, 1985

When the shamanic artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) declared in the 1970s that we are living in a time when performers have become politicians and politicians have become performers, it seemed that Beuys was identifying one of those cyclic moments in history that would soon give way. But here we are, twenty-five years on, and, if anything, the state of affairs Beuys described has deepened. Indeed, the idea that politicians have only slipped further into their actors’ masks was the subject of the late Arthur Miller in *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, the 30th Annual Jefferson Lecture, which the esteemed playwright delivered shortly after George W. Bush’s 2001 inauguration. (“We are ruled more by the arts of performance, by acting in other words, than anybody wants to think about for very long,” Miller excoriated official Washington.) But just as politicians have adopted the inauthenticity of acting and a grasping for celebrity as substitutes for a genuine commitment to public service, artists of all kinds have stepped into the breach to assume the mantle of community leaders, as activists and social critics.

Choreographer Jane Comfort entered the art world just as Beuys was making his prescient pronouncement, and her development has been representative of socially conscious artists of the past quarter century. It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism has re-introduced “content” to the work of artists during that time, and certainly the zeitgeist is not to be denied. But the galvanizing force for the radicalization of art was certainly the Reagan Revolution, a phenomenon that dogged Comfort’s first steps as a choreographer. As Reagan’s election in 1980 began the inexorable dismantling of the social safety net that had been a profound force for equity in this country since the 1930s, as it mandated an about-face on the gains for social justice that had been achieved by minority populations, and as it declared a war on culture and art in response to the pluralism of cultural diversity, the radical nature of this political convulsion and its disastrous implications for a compassionate and open society were immediately apparent. Artists did indeed step in and assumed for themselves those roles a “streamlined” government had abrogated: as caretakers and healers of the distressed, the less fortunate, the ill, and the forgotten, and as spokespeople for democratic and pluralistic ideals. In response, artists became outraged and articulate critics of social and political policies that were aggravating inequality. They were also moved to action by the homophobic response to AIDS—it took Reagan seven years to publicly utter the word—an illness that was taking a disproportionate toll on the artistic community.

With her socially conscious artmaking, Jane Comfort has been on the front lines in all of these areas of dissent. In her work, the aptly-named Comfort has given voice and succor to the disaffected and marginalized: to drag queens, the homeless, gays and lesbians, the suppressed, the abused, the afflicted. She has taken to heart the idea that art is a place where we can enter the imaginations of others, and by doing so, develop compassion, empathy, and some degree of understanding for those who are different from us. Even at its wittiest, Comfort’s work is a serious examination of those things that unite us as well as those things that separate us, and how we can reconcile those states of being.

Jane Comfort’s America is a true cross-section of this country. Unlike the fuzzily idealized images of *Leave It to Beaver* small-town America that dominate our political conventions and discussions, it is inhabited by real people living and working in communities.
good old boys and by transvestite prostitute drug addicts, by superheroes and strippers, by congressmen and DJs, by drag kings and Southern belles, by society decorators and rapists, by hard-charging businessmen and struggling artists, and by people of every color, sexual orientation, and gender. In showing America unvarnished and gloriously mongrel, Comfort wrests from politicians the idea of just what an American—and certainly, what an American hero—is. In viewing those outside the mainstream as individuals rather than as stereotypes, Comfort’s work acknowledges that America’s strength lies in its diversity and that a compassionate view toward those unlike ourselves is the true basis of America’s greatness.

In developing a form to contain these statements about breaching barriers of race, class, gender, and culture, Comfort has developed a new mode of performance whose structure is consonant with this content. Comfort has always been a “low walls” artist, dismissing disciplinary boundaries in form as she crosses cultural borders in her themes. Her work is an amalgam of dance, theater, language, sound, music, visual arts, storytelling, puppetry, gesture, and poetry.

This borderless state began very early in Comfort’s career with her embrace of text. She calls language “the defining thing” in her work, and not only was she using text long before it became commonplace for choreographers to do so, but her sophistication in experimenting with the various ways that textual and gestural forms can intersect has kept her far ahead of the curve. From her initial forays of using language as a “melodic line” in accompaniment to movement, she has moved on to explore classic performance texts in movement terms, to write her own theater pieces, and to collaborate with poets, playwrights, and lyricists. Always, however, language exists in service to the idea of how it is a force for understanding and shaping human consciousness. And in her more recent work, often the language has been reduced to an isolated sound or word, employed as a disruption of silence, to achieve maximum resonance.

Over the last fifteen or so years of dancemaking, Comfort has aimed for the marriage of structure and meaning, and she has created a series of deeply reverberating works of political bite and poetic subtlety. Her breakthrough in extended form came in Department, her two-part examination of racial bigotry. A native Tennessean, Comfort used Department: South (1990) to expose the ugliness that lurks just under the surface of Southern politeness and gentility. She credits fellow Southerner Mark Dendy, who performed in this work, with giving her the courage not only to expose this offensiveness but also to view its perpetrators with compassion. It was Mark Russell, then-curator of P.S. 122, who encouraged her to look at the more subtle but equally destructive manifestations of Northern bigotry in Department: North (1991), which turned Comfort’s attention to homophobia and misogyny, in addition to race.

Another breakthrough of a different sort came in Comfort’s 1993 Faith Healing, a movement recreation of Tennessee Williams’s Glass Menagerie. In Faith Healing, Comfort created textual movement and gestural language to create a hybrid form of dance theater that was more than the sum of those two elements. While Comfort turned to a classic American drama for the underpinning story, she deconstructed Williams’s plot and dialogue to excavate themes and ideas, such as homoeroticism and the sexual fantasies of person with a disability, that Williams could not make explicit in 1944. In casting Dendy as Williams’s monstre sacré Amanda Wingfield, Comfort also explored in earnest the gender bending that she had begun to examine in Department, and that was to become a preoccupation culminating in her next work.

S/he (1995) was an essay in gender behavior that incorporated Comfort’s research into cross-dressing. Comfort developed a drag-king alter-ego, Jack Daniels, “a Charlie Manson wanahee from the trailer park.” In her forays around New York as Daniels, Comfort became
acutely aware of differences in male and female movement behavior and their attendant privilege and oppression. The work was also an enraged response to the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, in which congressmen treated respected legal scholar Hill as an hysterical fantasizer, barraging her with sexist and racist insinuations concerning her dating history, her sexual proclivities, and her psychological stability. Comfort transformed the hearing transcripts into passages for a gospel choir, and added text that highlighted the racial ugliness that drove the hearings. Her next work, *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous* (1996), was also an angry response to official malfeasance, this time to the havoc wreaked by the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress and the hijacking of the national social agenda by the radical far right in its war on the poor and on artists. As she had with *S/he*, Comfort had only to let politicians—Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole, Bill Clinton, and Pat Robertson—supply a text that was more satirical than any scriptwriter could have invented.

Comfort’s recent work finds the political in the personal, as it focuses on how social attitudes and conditions create the contexts for our lives. *Underground River* (1998) is a poetic exploration of the world of the disabled and, by metaphorical implication, of the creative mind. Still, even in its psychological delicacy, it is not far from the broad lampooning of *Three Bagatelles*; for in its defense of the special insight achieved by the artist there is an answer to those right-wing politicians who characterize the federal government’s presence in the arts as aid to social parasites. In Comfort’s canon, *Persephone* (2004), based on the Greek myth, seems even more at odds, on its surface closer in spirit to Martha Graham’s Jungian explorations than to Comfort’s customary socially-activist work. Yet, here again, we see an artist exploring forms and ideas that give resonant voice to our contemporary nightmares. That this involves mining the ancient Western heritage for source material is really no contradiction at all, as what Comfort finds in Persephone’s story is a guidebook for learning to survive profound psychological and social upheaval.

In her activist stance, Comfort conceives of “Art as a Verb” (to use the title of a 1989 show of politically conscious art mounted by the Studio Museum of Harlem). That is, in using every means of communication at her disposal—movement, language, visual elements, and music—Comfort brings authenticity and commitment to her voice of resistance. In engaging on the front lines of the Culture Wars over two decades, she has established her bona fides as cultural worker and cultural warrior. In simultaneously creating work of deeply metaphorical implication that is resonant with layers of meaning, Comfort also establishes her bona fides as a profound artist.

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