SHALL WE DANCE?:
FLIRTING WITH CULTURE IN BOMBINGHAM

It's opening night for "Southern Danceworks 2000." The stage is in the Alabama Theater, a majestic show palace from the 1930s, which seats close to 4,000. Southern Danceworks' artistic director Teri Weksler stretches on stage, preparing for the piece that she choreographed for the event. Her expectations are high; the show also features works choreographed by Kraig Patterson, a young star in the modern dance world of New York City. The dancers, some of whom are regulars with the classical Alabama Ballet Company, have spent weeks rehearsing amidst their part-time jobs and teaching assignments. Backstage, as they don their colorful costumes, they nervously wonder if they can pull off these difficult new works. They needn't worry: in the Sunday morning edition of the *Birmingham News*, arts reporter/critic Nancy Raabe would call the show "a knock-down, drag-out spectacular evening of modern dance."

But on this premier night, fewer than 100 people have turned out for the show.

Is modern dance—modern dance brought by dancers with years of New York City experience—too much for an Alabama audience to appreciate?

While cutting-edge artists in Chicago, San Francisco, and Atlanta present the latest post-millennial trends to their ardent audiences, serious creators in Birmingham are still struggling to herd the masses into the modern world.

Kraig Patterson is floating, face down, arms outstretched, eagle-like. He soars above his dance partner, whose chest rests on up-bent knees. "It's like you're looking for this little mouse," he explains to his company, then returns his bird's eye stare straight down to the studio floor.

Patterson, a New York City dancer and choreographer, is in Birmingham, Alabama, marching dancers from Southern Danceworks through their paces. They are rehearsing one of his pieces, "*make like a tree*"—a work originally commissioned by Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project. Patterson has just watched the second run-through, and with barely a week until opening night, there are some rough edges to smooth out and little time to marshal the troupe.

For transplanted New York dancers used to a wide appreciation of their art, swooping down on the city of Birmingham can be a severe culture shock. Patterson is here because of Southern Danceworks Artistic Director Teri Weksler, a Juilliard-trained dancer who spent years as a principal with the Mark Morris Group. The company is bunkered down in a new million-dollar facility, a rehearsal space built for the Alabama Ballet. The sparkling space suggests abundant financial resources: purchase of the property and retrofitting the building were accomplished though a promissory co-signature of an individual backer; they are in the middle of a three-year capital campaign to pay for it.

While the mirrored walls and ballet bars still gleam and the music from the various rehearsal rooms blends in the bright air, outside, the remnants of Birmingham's once-thriving but now dangerously derelict warehouse district discourage walking alone. Despite the urban decay, and although it comes through the largesse of the city's more popular and established ballet company, the modern dancers are thrilled to have such a luxurious studio at their disposal. "The space is fabulous, and the students are really eager and

beautiful," says Patterson. "If you had this space in New York City, it would be a godsend. It's just incredible what they have here."

Birmingham is Alabama's largest and most cosmopolitan city, even though it's still relatively young. It was founded *after* the Civil War by northern industrialists and rough-and-tumble pioneers from the mid-Atlantic states. All were looking to capitalize on the area's natural gifts: it is one of only two places in the world where all the ingredients for steel—iron, coal and limestone—are found in close proximity.

As the city was settled, socialite brides from Atlanta, New Orleans and Montgomery brought with them traces of Southern gentility and appetites for fine arts. They also brought traditions firmly rooted in teachings from the Bible.

In the 1960s the city earned the nickname "Bombingham," an unaffectionate label born from years of violent explosions during the civil rights era. That tag was renewed following January 1998's abortion clinic bombing, the country's first such fatal incident. Time has not washed away the indelible photographs of police chief "Bull" Connor unleashing dogs and spraying firehoses on black protestors in the 1960s. The echoes from the deadly 16th Street Baptist Church bombing are still felt here—recalled most recently in Spike Lee's 1997 film, "4 Little Girls." That incident would set many other events in motion, especially for one young resident who would become an infamous activist in the late '60s, Angela Davis. Those sores still remain open; federal investigators have indicted two former Ku Klux Klan members who are believed to have been involved 35 years ago. Currently they are awaiting trial and being held without bond.

The arts community is not unscathed by Birmingham's still highly conservative environment. Five Points South is Bohemia central, rescued from urban blight by the city 20 years ago. A public fountain, "The Storytellers," erected in 1993 by Birmingham sculptor Frank Fleming, features an anthropomorphized ram holding court with a book in his lap as various creatures sit listening and frogs spout water. The work raised an uproar for being Satanic.

"Anytime you deal with a horned animal, that scares people," says

Fleming. As in many cases, the protest ironically backfired and led to increased recognition. “It certainly didn’t hurt me; in fact, it was the probably the greatest thing that’s happened to my career in the past ten years,” he says. The fountain now sits, graffiti-scrawled and adorned with the flotsam and jetsam of urban lunchers: Styrofoam cups and potato chip bags.

Approbation extends to outsiders as well. Six years ago the University of Alabama in Birmingham invited Andres Serrano to lecture to its art classes. As was common practice, the department raised money to purchase a work from their guest lecturer to add to their permanent collection. They purchased “Pieta II” from the infamous Serrano series which produced the “Piss Christ,” a linchpin for attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts and its funding mechanisms. This work features a replica of Michelangelo’s “Pieta” immersed in urine, and the purchase brought condemnation of the department from ten county commissions. While it has been shown to art students at the university, the work has never been displayed for the public. Curator Antoinette Nordan laments this fact but says the reason behind its public disappearance is not from pressure but rather the department’s lack of a space to present *any* of its 400 works.

But the conservative environment can affect artistic displays. Two weeks following 1998’s abortion clinic blast, Space One Eleven, an artist’s cooperative that awards art scholarships to inner-city children, received anonymous bomb threats over a proposed exhibit by Atlanta artist Larry Jens Anderson entitled “Where Do Queers Come From?” The exhibit used iconography from the “Dick and Jane” reading primers and centered around a giant “genetic wheel of fortune,” where viewers could spin the wheel, and a gold-painted dildo determined the sexual preference of imagined offspring. The tightly budgeted organization was forced to use its limited funds to hire security for the event. Director Anne Arrasmith knows what the conservative environment has bred.

“Fear.”

Of what?

“Difference.” And she says it’s a fear born from Bible-induced hatreds and anti-intellectualism.

"I just saw something in the *Birmingham News* that every school system is in the red," she says. "If you do not educate people properly and if you hear the entertainment of hate, that's what you get. And it is an entertainment. It's easy to entertain people with hate."

For others, the exhibit highlighted a corollary problem: a conservative corporate environment. "The title itself was very provocative," remembers Catherine Gilmore, director of the Metropolitan Arts Council, a major fundraising and distributing body for the arts community. "You go to an Alabama Power executive and say 'We want you to fund a show called "Where Do Queers Come From?,'" he'll laugh you out of his office."

The Metropolitan Arts Council distributes monies raised from private corporate donations and serves as the fiscal agent for the city's public arts funding. Any non-profit arts group can apply for funding, and it serves 35 arts groups. It's a conservative corporate environment, one that does not sponsor controversial exhibits or performances. Gilmore points to the recent privately funded Brooklyn Museum exhibit, "SENSATION: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," that spurred New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to withdraw city support for the museum.

"Giuliani was saying the same thing that someone in a corporate setting here would say: 'It's just not good taste,'" says Gilmore. "'If (Charles) Saatchi wants to fund that, that's fine, but don't expect Joe Blow on the street to fund it, because they may not want to do that.' And I think that's the point Giuliani was trying to make. We don't want public tax money funding this."

Frenzied searches for the new direction in which art is headed may be happening in New York City or other more cosmopolitan places, but in Birmingham, arts groups struggle for recognition in a much different environment.

Says Gilmore, "We have a hard time convincing corporations here to support even simple arts things. There's not any corporate entity in this city that I'm aware of that would be that interested in doing something like that. They're just not here."

Gilmore notes a study that determined Birmingham has more churches than any city of its size in the nation. "The number one leisure activity in this area is Bible study," she emphasizes. That often precludes opening any exhibit that might be challenging to Birmingham's 750,000 residents.

A current exhibit by Arrasmith's Space One Eleven illustrates her point as well. "Spontaneous Combustion" is a grouping of three artists who did not

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begin painting until into their '50s. For one of them, Thornton Dial, it is only the second time his work has been exhibited in his hometown of Birmingham, even though he has been working for twelve years and has achieved national recognition: this year he is part of the Whitney Museum's Biennial in New York City. Arrasmith thinks Dial, who is black, is not sanctioned by Birmingham's art elite.

"Fifty years ago, Thornton Dial could not have happened," she says, "because there wouldn't have been a space. There wouldn't have been the money. There wouldn't have been the recognition."

Arrasmith and others lay part of the blame for the elitist stranglehold on Birmingham arts funding on the Metropolitan Arts Council itself. Many claim the organization does not support all of the groups it is supposed to represent; the lion's share of funding goes to the big boys: the Alabama Symphony, the Alabama Ballet, the Birmingham Museum of Art. Fringe groups like Space One Eleven receive pittances and depend almost entirely on support from other private sources. Aggressive grant-writing campaigns have given Arrasmith recognition that saves her from the slings and arrows of the conservative MAC.

"If I go through one year with no recognition by a Rockefeller, an N.E.A. or a Warhol (grant), they'll eat me alive," she says. "They do criticize me, but they won't come after me. If I lose (grants) one year, they'll eat me alive. But I've always been able to get grants because of the quality of the work and the quality of the concept."

And while the Alabama Ballet offers an acceptable dance outlet for the ladies who lunch, box-office ticket takers report phone calls from prospective attendees asking whether their male dancers "dangle." Technically intricate and challenging modern dance remains a foreign commodity for most here.

It is in this environment that Teri Weksler, who moved here with her family seven years ago, found herself. "Yeah, it was quite a shock. I didn't know what to expect."

Born in Baltimore, Teri Weksler trained in classical ballet during her early years. "There was very little modern to be had at that time growing up in the 1950s in Baltimore. And until I went to university—Adelphi on Long Island in Garden City—I had no modern at all. I had seen a few clips of Martha Graham, but very little else. And that's when I became addicted to modern."

After exposure to modern dance at Adelphi, Weksler's future was set at Julliard where she studied with the greats, eventually becoming a principal with the Mark Morris Company. "When I first came to Julliard, Anthony Tutor was there. Jose Limon was there. So these were two greats in ballet and modern. Martha Graham had just left to start her own school. I was exposed to everything."

For more than 20 years, she trod the boards. "We did a lot of repertory, old modern dance repertory as well as new repertory. So, in my first couple of years after I left Julliard, I danced in repertory companies, where we did like a piece by Pilobolus, a piece by Anna Sokolow, a piece by Doris Humphrey, who's one of the old wonderful, wonderful modern choreographers of our time. And all of that just evolved into ultimately working with Mark Morris for all those years."

In the companies of Hannah Kahn, 5 by 2, Daniel Lewis, Jim Shelf, and the Rome Opera Ballet, she danced her way into the modern scene. It was a love she had not found in classical ballet. "It's something that you feel your niche in or not," Weksler says. "I felt like I wanted to move my body, my torso, my head. I love ballet and always will love ballet. But I really wanted to do a more complete body-movement feeling, and it just encompassed a lot more for me."

Featured in Baryshnikov's touring White Oaks Dance Project, Weksler received a "Bessie," a New York Dance and Performance Award, in 1995. But the highpoint of her career was an 11-year affiliation with the Mark Morris Dance Group.

"The ultimate experience was working with Mark Morris, just a brilliant, brilliant man. We began as friends. We danced together. From his very first show, the critical acclaim suggested he would become this giant modern choreographer of our time."

"He imparted the love of the rehearsal studio, the importance of laughing, being able to laugh at yourself. You know dancers are very hard on themselves, but this experience really made you look at it in a very different way."

When her husband became an executive with the Cobb Theater movie chain, Weksler moved to Birmingham. At a time when she was extracting herself from a full-time dance career, the mother of two decided to give domestic tranquility a chance in Alabama. Weksler had to return to New York City for spiritual rejuvenation, or sojourn to Atlanta or Nashville to catch the occasional touring modern company. Then Southern Danceworks coerced her into doing something she had never attempted: choreography.

"I thought I would never choreograph a dance and I did, and I discovered I enjoyed it," she remembers. "And being here was a very positive experience, because I wasn't worried about what everyone was going to think. Mark wasn't here like looking at my choreography. So it was more of a freeing experience in that sense. And I have been choreographing since then."

Today, Weksler is the standard-bearer for modern dance in a city in which classical ballet is more easily digested. It's a stressful campaign; there's no marketing executive, no promotions director, no subscription supervisor, only a volunteer board of directors.

Like many fringe groups, Southern Danceworks has had an itinerant existence. Alabama's oldest professional modern dance company, it sprang from Birmingham Creative Dance around a corps of dancers who yearned for a local modern dance outlet. It officially changed its name to Southern

Danceworks in 1983. Since taking over as the artistic director, Weksler has run the troupe from her home.

There is a limited dance market in Birmingham, and much of that market rallies around the more traditional Alabama Ballet. Its Artistic Director Wes Chapman, who learned ballet in Montgomery, Alabama, and spent years as a principal with the American Ballet Theater, has returned to Birmingham with New York City experience and credentials. He has choreographed and presented new pieces with the company, and Birmingham has embraced the company with a newfound fervor.

"I think that there definitely is a preference. The (Alabama) Ballet Company has been here for years," notes Weksler. "And I think there is still the idea that you have to have ballet to have to do modern, which really is not so anymore. Things are really changing in the dance world. Ballet companies are doing much more modern things; modern companies are much more technical now. These dancers can do everything."

Ironically, one thing about Birmingham that stimulates her is its isolation. She doesn't have to size herself up against the New York scene. "When you see a lot of wonderful things around you all the time, you may not feel the need to do something yourself that's creative, because it's all there for you," Weksler says.

Her driving force is the hope that audiences will eventually recognize the beauty of modern dance. She realizes she must help them in the beginning. "One of my goals was to make it really accessible so that anybody would look at it and say 'Oh, that's interesting. I liked that. That was really neat,' without having to have a background or know a lot about it. You can do it to any kind of music, and it can often be really interesting, and sometimes it's really funny, and sometimes it's sad, just like ballet," Weksler says.

That optimism seems to be paying off.

Weksler is also trying to build an audience from the ground up. As a part of the Alabama State Council on the Arts' rural touring program, she travels the backroads, soldiering into isolated communities with a program she calls "All Shapes and Sizes." In it, four dancers with large, geometric-shaped

props thread geometry and math into body movement, giving her young audiences a taste of modern dance before many have even sampled ballet.

"They love this program. They're kind of mesmerized by it," says Weksler, perhaps seeing some of these kids filling future auditoriums. "I think they are fascinated by everything. They love the live music, they love the props, and they love to see the dancers moving on stage. And it has a little bit of everything for them. Sometimes they're embarrassed, because I think moving bodies can be embarrassing to kids, but then I think it wins them over in the end."

But whether these kids can teach their parents to appreciate modern dance or other modern expressions on all of the arts remains to be seen. The strictures of the Scriptures can make the Bible Belt a tough place to introduce new and challenging thoughts and concepts. A recent exhibit at Birmingham's major museum is an attempt to broaden the Alabama palette and an example of what the future may hold if adults can see past their immediate surroundings.

"Sign and Gesture, Contemporary Abstract Art from the Haskell Collection" signals a prodigal return. Preston Haskell was born and raised in Birmingham, but left to go to school at Princeton, Harvard and MIT. He has built and nurtured one of the premier international architectural design firms in Jacksonville, Florida. At the same time, he has gathered a prestigious modern abstract art collection that has been on tour across the Southeast, eventually landing in his native city. For him, recognizing the beauty of Robert Motherwell, Gerhardt Richter, Roy Lichtenstein or any of the other abstract artists in his collection is not impossible in this environment.

"You don't have to be a liberal or a left-winger to enjoy contemporary art," says Haskell. "Even in a conservative climate, the energy, the beauty, the mystery of abstract art can be greatly appreciated by people who may have heretofore only thought in terms of classical art or more historical and representational forms of visual art."

"One's mind can be opened and broadened, regardless of what sort of image the community might have," Haskell says. Maybe Birmingham is on the edge of discovering that path to the modern world.