

## INTERVIEW

CLIPPING FILE

tandy beal:  
FIGURE OF DANCE

by judith broadhurst



PHOTO: JON SCOVILLE

**T**andy Beal & Company conclude their annual "Home Season" with two Monterey performances this month.

One of dancer-choreographer Tandy Beal's most powerful works isn't really a dance at all. "Figure of Speech" she calls it.

Arms akimbo, pacing the center of an empty stage in a jumpsuit with the legs rolled up to mid-calf, Beal begins by thinking aloud, considering how she could begin. Her soliloquy plays across the backdrop of the empty stage like a searchlight against the night sky.

"And they leap so high you have to put your head back to see them," she says. "And you look up, and you see the sky, and you see the stars. And you forget.

"You forget the should-have-beens, the would-have-beens. You forget what so-and-so said to you, and what you wish you'd said back. You see the stars."

It's like magic. It's all in the slight gestures of her hands, the everyday turns of her body, the subtle, tantalizing inflections of her voice. Without so much as an arabesque, she draws you into the dance which exists only on the mirror of your mind.

Modern dance seldom falls back on such classic movements as the arabesque, anyway. Today's choreographers rely less on pure movement for the sake of movement than their predecessors. What stories they tell are still more abstract than those of ballet, more akin to poetry than drama, and they tend toward timely social commentary or lessons from their lives, not fairy tales.

But, where the first generation of modern-dance masters rejected the theatrical elements of classical ballet, the

distinctions between theatre and dance are blurring now more than ever. Costumes are street clothes as often as leotards and tights. Elaborate sets are popular again, as funding allows. Narration, even dialogue, is becoming the norm.

"What I do is make theatre," Beal says. "My home is theatre, and my tool is dancing." She means it literally, having grown up the child of professional actors John Beal and the late Helen Craig.

Although she claims her works are seldom autobiographical, she admits to making "The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light" just after her mother died, traumatically, five years ago. Her father even performed with her when the piece premiered.

And it's hard to miss the parallels in "Figure of Speech." The disembodied voice we hear reciting poetry in the background is her mother's, on tape. "The scar remembers the wound, and the wound remembers the pain," the voice says, eerily. In Beal's own voice, as she responds, we hear the pain that lingers within her from her mother's anguish.

"Once more you are crying," we hear her mother say. At the back of the stage, it is dark. Very dark. Beal sits on a chair, staring into the void, as though hypnotized.

"I have a key, so I open the door, and I walk in," the voice intones. "It is dark, and I walk in."

Beal rises, silently and in slow motion, pulled or called by a far-away voice we cannot hear. She disappears, walking into the darkness behind her, as though crossing to The Other Side. It is moving, regardless, but more so because it reminds the audience that this woman-child, who began by standing so confidently onstage before them, is inescapably her mother's daughter, and her father's.

"She's a very charismatic solo dancer," says Janice Ross, the San Francisco correspondent for *Dance* magazine who teaches dance history at Stanford. "There's no woman in modern dance who comes readily to mind who matches Tandy's stage presence as a solo figure...

"Nationally, she's quite well known

and respected, and she's had immense influence in the Bay Area. Because of her, the definition of Bay Area dance extends to Santa Cruz. She's really the person who opened the boundaries for there to be a serious, West Coast dance center in the Monterey Bay area."

Certainly her origins were pivotal, but it was her years dancing with Murray Louis and Alwin Nikolais in New York that were formative. The other major influence in Beal's life is Jon Scoville, the musician she met while still in her early teens who has been her mate for 28 years now. It was his teaching career which brought them to Santa Cruz.

Beal and Scoville have jointly directed Tandy Beal & Company for 16 of those years, logging collaborations with Gordon Mumma, Frank Zappa and Bobby McFerrin. The first show with McFerrin was televised nationwide on PBS. Last year, the company won a U.S. State Department-sponsored tour of Eastern Europe.

The company office, with a five-person administrative staff which keeps the grants flowing and the publicity machine oiled, is in downtown Santa Cruz. But the company's real home is the one-time bordello and boardinghouse in the Santa Cruz Mountains where Beal, Scoville and sundry company members and visitors live and work.

They converted a building next to the secluded house into a set-building shop, and built an airy, high-ceilinged rehearsal studio out of the surrounding redwoods. The staff ferociously fends off anyone who might break the spell of serenity in their mountain retreat which Beal, Scoville and company have transformed into a kind of artist's colony.

"What I really am interested in is transformation," Beal says over tea in her old-fashioned kitchen. "You can see that in all my work. Through the passage of time and through the events, what changes take place?"

The kitchen is the sort that people really cook and eat in, and the grand dining table can seat a dozen or more. She sits folded over, almost, as only one with great flexibility can. Her body is large and long and lanky; without its dancer's

suppleness it could be ungainly. Instead, with her waist-length hair flowing as she moves, Beal's about as awkward as a willow tree.

She speaks softly, in a low, dusky voice. She unconsciously chooses words which are sensual, fertile, nurturing. "Dust to Dust" came music first," she says of a piece she's doing in Monterey in early March, as though recounting the birth of a child.

That elegant earthiness comes through in her dances, but the most striking thing about Beal's approach is how remarkably visual it is. She choreographs as though she's painting in watercolors. Her eye for nuances of shape, light and composition is as keen as any photographer's or painter's.

"That's where I'm totally triggered," she says, "in the visual. That's where my greatest joy is in creating a piece."

Joy is the other signature of her style. In a single evening, she'll swing from somber to slapstick. Although some of her pensive pieces like "Figure of Speech" are memorable, it's the whimsy and images that catch you off guard that are much of her appeal to audiences of all ages, dance aficionados or not.

She has a wonderful sense of the absurd and, with the help of talented lighting, set, costume and prop people, conjures up bizarre shadow monsters, molds dancers into protean life forms or injects balloons with lives and personalities of their own.

"I can walk into very goofy land," she says. "The dark and the light are like night and day. They both make up the 24 hours. The experience of being human has both. If you're lucky, you keep your sense of humor about it, and you don't get bitter..."


"We're taught that we have to understand everything with our minds. Very few people understand things with their feelings. Art is about feelings. Art is about moving our spirits. People have to release their preconceptions so that they can sit there, sanitized, and just watch it for the geometry."

To truly appreciate contemporary art of any kind, she says, you must appreciate the yin and the yang. "You have to have

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the full range. Some people have a preconception that art has to be serious and dark, or 'Art has to be something that, when I walk out of the theatre, I feel good.' I think it's all of that."

*Tandy Beal & Company performs and Santa Catalina School in Monterey on Friday and Saturday, March 1 and 2, at 8 p.m. For tickets, call Center Stage at 649-5561 or, to charge by phone, 429-1324.*



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