

DANCE 2007: OPENING ACTS

BY ANN HASKINS

Wednesday, December 26, 2007 - 8:00 am

Picking favorite dance performances in a given year feels like Sophie's Choice, as impossible as choosing among your children. How to compare ambitious but underfunded efforts against polished, deep-pocketed touring ventures? Still, there were individual standouts: **Hamburg Ballet** at Orange County Performing Arts Center, demonstrating why John Neumeier is possibly the most masterful living choreographer; Jacques Heim's **Diavolo Dance Theater** at the Hollywood Bowl, confirming the local company's ascension to the major leagues; **Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal** at UCLA, reminding us why her vision is worth several hours of our time. Yet more important are some ongoing efforts that promise even more for 2008.



Modern epic: Heidi Duckler's *My Beowulf*

The two major dance venues for the greater L.A. area (okay, OCPAC is in Orange County, but it's all L.A. sprawl) both opened their 2007–2008 seasons with unconventional offerings modeled on successful New York City events. At OCPAC, **Fall for Dance** offered four delirious performances with 10 national and international dance companies. With all seats at \$10, it generated lines that resembled a sold-out rock concert. A slew of free workshops and smaller events held some gems, but should be better publicized next time (please, let there be a next time!). Kudos to OCPAC and the donors who helped underwrite the tickets and made seeing great dance as affordable as going to a movie. In downtown L.A., the Music Center's 2007-2008 dance series opened with a free event also borrowed from New York: David Michalek's **Slow Dancing**, an installation with 5 seconds of filmed dance slowed and projected over 10 minutes. Originally screened onto the façade of Lincoln Center's State Theater, *Slow Dancing* was given a So Cal tweak, with footage of 37 stars from an array of dance genres projected onto four giant screens around the Music Center's fountain. For more than a week, throngs strolled around or perched strategically at sites that allowed simultaneous views of all four screens. A few nights were marred by technical glitches, but for the cost of parking, the dance season was launched with a mesmerizing experience.

California likes to brag that if it were a country, its economy would be the sixth largest in the world, yet its arts funding shamefully rivals only the most underdeveloped countries. In California's bleak world of government arts funding, Los Angeles County is a bright spot, particularly the support for the **John**

Anson Ford Amphitheatre dance series. This summer season at the county-owned venue included a new and laudable private-public partnership: Target provided underwriting that reduced children's tickets to \$5 — thereby allowing more parents to bring their children — among whom will come the next generation of dance lovers.

My cable company provides four golf channels, two military channels and more shopping channels than my credit card limit can stand. But a channel devoted to the dance? Not a chance. To fill the void, there's the L.A.-based **Dance Channel TV** (www.dancechannelTV.com). Founded in 2006 by former Bolshoi Ballet dancer Arsen Serobian, it has become a go-to site for Internet-savvy dancers and dance fans.

Heidi Duckler and her loyal band of collaborators in Collage Theater have mastered the art of site-specific events. From early efforts inside a laundromat on gentrifying Montana Avenue, to historic jails, abandoned street car terminals and even a high school locker room, Duckler and company have become established ambassadors for L.A.'s cultural landscape. With **My Beowulf**, Duckler merged her interests in contemporary L.A. culture with the ancient saga of derring-do. The latest full-evening episode was set in a traditional theater, but opened portals to other worlds — a phenomenon that 2008 installments of *My Beowulf* promise to explore further.

In 2007, Los Angeles acquired what promises to be the major-league professional ballet company the city lacks. Led by former Royal Danish Ballet artistic director Thordal Christensen and former NYCB ballet star Colleen Neary, **Los Angeles Ballet** launched an inaugural season that proved the young company's adroit way with Bournonville and Balanchine, as well as a world-premiere *Nutcracker* set in 1912 Southern California. Recognizing the region's size and traffic woes, LAB tours locally with venues in West L.A., Glendale and Redondo Beach, bringing great ballet to greater L.A. For 2008, LAB is stretching into a more contemporary mode, with choreography from Lars Lubovitch and commissioned works from local choreographer Jennifer Backhaus and former NYCB dancer Melissa Barak. While it's wonderful that L.A. is a tour destination for major companies, just as with sports, there's something special about having a premier home team to follow.