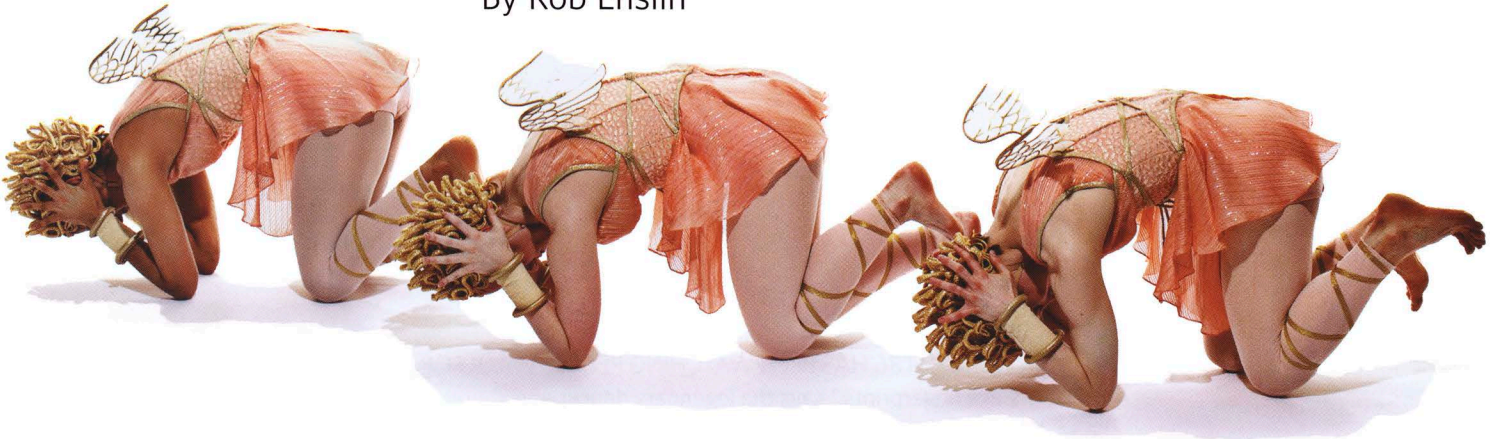




IN STEP with a Dance Legend

By Rob Enslin



Troilus and Cressida (reduced)

More than 50 years ago, Paul Taylor left SU to pursue a newfound passion—and he has dazzled the world of contemporary dance ever since

Banquet of Vultures (2005)



Michael Trusnovec

PAUL TAYLOR '53, H'86 HAS BEEN WATCHING PEOPLE WALK FOR THE BETTER PART OF A CENTURY. "Walks are like fingerprints," says the legendary dancer and choreographer, a glint in his eye. "No two are the same. In auditions, I always have dancers walk. You can tell how much confidence they have, whether they're mean...generous...or beautiful." No matter if Taylor is trying out a dancer or engaging in one of his guilty pleasures—he admits to trailing a policeman on the street "just to see what he's up to"—he maintains a fresh curiosity about people and how they move through the world. Humanity—impressions of what it is and what it can be—has been at the core of his work since he created *Jack and the Beanstalk* for his fledgling troupe in 1954. Today, even with 124 original dance works to his credit, Taylor says he is still searching for "really good dance" that captures the multiple layers of human existence. Many in his worldwide audience believe he succeeds regularly.

On April 15, 2006, more than 1,200 people filled Syracuse's Mulroy Civic Center Theater for the premiere of Taylor's comic romp, *Troilus and Cressida (reduced)*, and three Taylor classics that shared the bill: *Aureole* (1962), *Esplanade* (1975), and *Spindrift* (1993). The choreographer, who left Syracuse a few credits short of graduation to study dance at the Juilliard School of Music, marked the

occasion of the premiere—and his visit back to town—by including Ponchielli's "Dance of the Hours" in *Troilus*. It was music he last used as a Syracuse student to create his first dance piece. "I guess you can say I came full circle," Taylor says, noting that "Dance of the Hours" is among the most recognized compositions in Western classical music. In the animated feature film

Fantasia (1940), it accompanied a troupe of dancing hippos, and later resurfaced in 1963 as “A Letter from Camp,” a hit song parody by Allan Sherman (“Hello muddah, hello faddah...”). Taylor says he began choreographing *Troilus* after listening to the music hundreds of times, incorporating elements from Disney’s *Fantasia* sequence and Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, the story of a Trojan prince and his beloved, torn apart by the politics of war. Taylor jokes that he tagged “reduced” on the title when he realized the musical composition was not long enough to depict the entire story. Lisa Viola, who joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company in 1992, danced the role of Cressida. “Comedy is all about timing, and you never know how comedy is going to play out,” she says. “It was really satisfying to finally perform it in front of an audience and then hear the reaction, which was so supportive and sweet.”

Dean Cathryn R. Newton of the College of Arts and Sciences, who co-commissioned the work in 2002, enjoyed the performance and found the Syracuse premiere apropos. “I thought *Troilus* was surprising and brilliant, drawing on Taylor’s first-time experiences as a choreographer,” she says. “It was filled with dazzling dance, and there was a charming self-deprecation in the way it was composed.” Critics and audiences have echoed Newton’s sentiments in Pittsburgh, Sarasota, Durham, Washington, D.C., and other cities where *Troilus* has been performed since the Syracuse premiere. In *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, a reviewer confessed to “laughing out loud at the pitch-perfect antics” of the dancers. *Ballet Magazine* called it “dance comedy *par excellence*.” The place of *Troilus and Cressida (reduced)* in Taylor’s main repertoire was confirmed by the announcement of its New York City premiere as part of the company’s spring 2007 season at City Center. It will be part of this summer’s European tour as well.

Taylor’s creative energies as a dancer

and choreographer have carried him and his work around the world many times over. Now in its sixth decade, the 16-member Paul Taylor Dance Company has performed in 520 cities in 62 countries, and reached millions more with performances broadcast on public television and available for home video. The six-member Taylor 2 troupe was established during the early ’90s to teach, perform,

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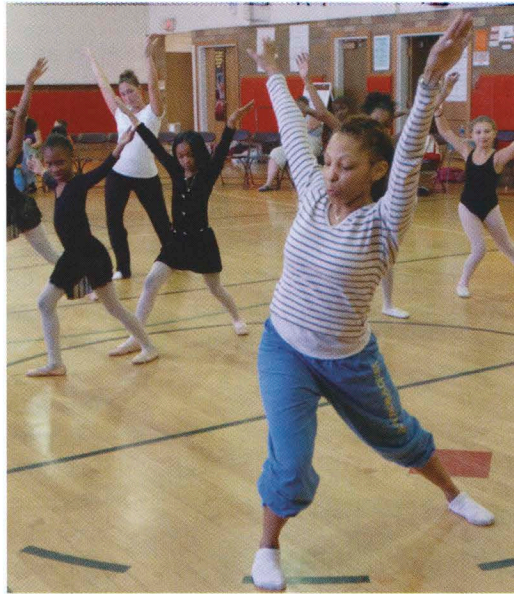
—Paul Taylor ’53, H’86

and engage in community outreach. It has appeared at dozens of schools (including two visits to SU since 2002), workplaces, and other settings. Taylor’s efforts have won him an impressive array of accolades, including the National Medal of Arts; Kennedy Center Honors; and appointment to the *Légion d’Honneur*, France’s highest recognition of achievement. His academic honoraria include a Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Syracuse University in 1986, and his 1987 autobiography, *Private Domain*, was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award.

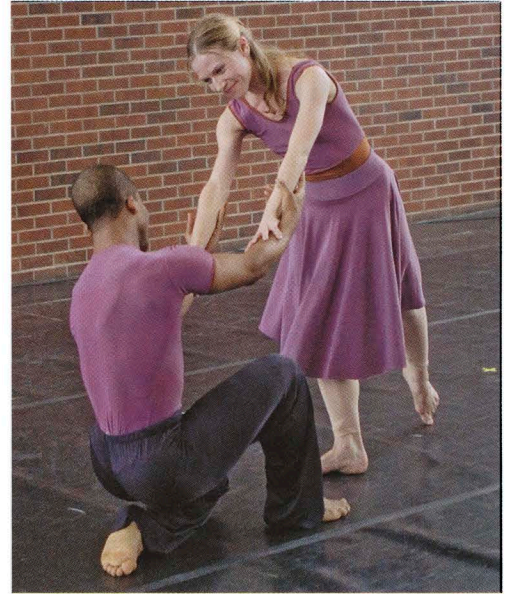
John Tomlinson, general manager of the dance company, believes the secret of Taylor’s success is intuition. “Paul makes decisions all the time that we disagree with, but we have a real appreciation for the fact that those decisions have led to our survival,” Tomlinson says. Taylor’s country home in Mattituck, New York, on the north fork at the eastern end of Long

Island, is an example of his intuition at work. He discovered the rustic, two-story saltbox in a magazine photo while waiting in the dentist’s office, but knew right then he had to buy it. Thirty years later, the seaside house, shrouded by trees and bamboo, is his sanctuary, affording Taylor, otherwise a Manhattanite, the solitude he needs to listen to music and pursue the joys of gardening, bird-watching, and insect-collecting. According to renowned Broadway choreographer Twyla Tharp, a friend who danced with the Taylor company during the ’60s, “Paul has a terrific sense of humor and is one of the world’s most intuitive zoologists.” Tharp and others, including Laura Dean, David Parsons, and Pina Bausch, are among the scores of Taylor alumni who have gone on to found their own troupes, a testimony to Taylor’s abilities to collaborate as well as teach—and to his generosity of spirit.

Gracefully tall and lean at 76, Taylor sits comfortably at his kitchen table, gazing out at Long Island Sound, slicks of gray hair at the margins of a youthful face accented by a wide, toothy grin. Even in a faded denim shirt and khaki slacks, he exudes a quiet elegance. Slowly and deliberately, Taylor, who was born in the Pittsburgh area, recounts growing up in Depression-era Washington, D.C., and choosing to attend Syracuse, where he painted and swam competitively before a chance summer job at a dance school in Bar Harbor, Maine, led to his self-discovery as a dancer. He speaks of his mentors—dance legends all: Martha Graham (“vivid and theatrical”), Doris Humphrey (“wise”), Merce Cunningham (“whimsical”); and Antony Tudor (“genius”). In 1954, Taylor formed his own group, while dancing with Martha Graham’s company for seven more seasons. “Most people were just hypnotized by Martha, and I was, too,” Taylor says. “But I saw through the part of her that was pure theatrics, and I appreciated it. She was fun to watch.” In 1959, Taylor appeared



During a recent visit to Syracuse, members of the Taylor 2 troupe work with students at Elmwood Elementary School (right) and perform at the Heroy building on campus (far right).



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— Charles Reinhart, director of the American Dance Festival

with the New York City Ballet in George Balanchine’s *Episodes* in a solo role that the master had choreographed especially for him. “Balanchine would usually get right to the point,” Taylor says. “There was very little talking [at rehearsal]. He was very economical. No time was wasted.” Charles Reinhart, current director of the American Dance Festival (ADF) in Durham, North Carolina, was Taylor’s first manager. Asked to describe the dancer on stage, he says, “Paul had a gift. He danced like a tiger that is light on its feet but is this huge force coming at you.”

Taylor’s reputation as a choreographer blossomed with the success of *Aureole* in 1962, first at the ADF, then at the International Theater Festival in Paris.

For the next dozen years, Taylor was in demand as a performer and choreographer, until the strain of the schedule and the injuries of a maturing dancer led to exhaustion. In 1974, he gave up dancing on stage, and thrived in the life of a full-time choreographer, creating a steady stream of new works and inspiring new generations of dancers.

Patrick Corbin, a Taylor dancer for 16 years before forming CorbinDances in 2005, likens Taylor’s creative process to a conversation. “He asks for your input almost immediately. You throw ideas out at him, and he says ‘no’ a lot. Then you click on something. It’s an amazing experience.” Viola agrees. “He allows the dancer’s personality and heart to be part

of the process,” she says. “He makes us look so much better with his choreography.” Clive Barnes, perhaps the leading contemporary critic of American dance, is an ardent admirer of Taylor. “Although his basic style remains constant, there’s a certain recognizable lope and leap to his work,” Barnes says. “He has a wonderful spatial sense of the stage and can adapt his style to many genres, extremely useful in building a repertoire.”

With his personal place in the pantheon of modern dance secure, Taylor worries about his company’s survival. “How this company has lasted this long is some kind of miracle,” he says. “I attribute our success partly to luck and partly to the help of benevolent people and

Aureole (1962)



Paul Taylor
and Eileen Cropley

wonderful dancers and staff.”

Reinhart believes Taylor’s legacy is significantly connected to his formative years at Syracuse. “Great choreographers don’t come out of dance conservatories,” he says. “They come out of the liberal arts—where the ideas are. That cross-fertilization of disciplines is what Syracuse [gave Taylor], without anybody even talking about it to him.” Taylor has renewed ties with the University, which continues to play a role in his development. Taylor company executive director Wallace Chappell says a number of ideas are on the table for a continuing relationship, including regular visits by the main company and Taylor 2 to campus and to alumni chapters. Moreover, creative

energies are flowing in both directions, as evidenced by the recent appointment of Chancellor Nancy Cantor to the Paul Taylor Dance Foundation Board of Directors. “Nancy understands what the delivery system is for dance because of her experience at universities, which are strong arts presenters, and she knows what bringing artists into the community can accomplish,” Chappell says.

Chancellor Cantor, who studied dance early in her career, characterizes Taylor’s artistry as “a perfect metaphor” for the University’s mission, as well as evidence of that mission’s fulfillment. “Through the universal language of dance, he has forged connections among peoples, ideas, and cultures that otherwise would

have remained invisible or unexpressed,” she says. “Paul has used his imagination to take risks and, ultimately, to transform the world around us.”

Taylor’s life seems to flow like an easy dance turn. But his many successes and the fame and admiration they have brought have not caused him to lose touch with the sentient, emotional body, a connection essential to creative risk-taking. In the Oscar-nominated documentary *Paul Taylor: Dancemaker*, Taylor told an interviewer, “I get my energy, I think, from being afraid to choreograph, being afraid to fail.” Taylor has transformed those fears into a creative force that has enriched an art form and the lives of those touched by it.