

ARTS

Soll & Co. explore tensions in recreation of Shaker dance

BETH SOLL AND COMPANY

Fitzgerald Theater, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School.

Friday, November 11.

By MARK ROBERTS

BETH SOLL, who is also director of the MIT Dance Workshop, and her company performed four dances under the shade of the Dance Umbrella's Fall season last weekend. Three were revivals of previous pieces, the fourth the newly commissioned *A Shaker Dance*, inspired by the history of the eighteenth century religious community that lived near here and found expression for their fervor in a life of austere discipline punctuated by ecstatic outbursts.

The subject proved a suitable one for Soll, for although there was much variety in the subjects and styles of the various dances, in all there seemed to be some concern with the tension between the freedom of the spirit in movement and its possible limitations by space or rules.

The first piece, *Persona*, for three dancers, placed tight, nervy movements by Me-

linda Sullivan and Phillip Karg within a geometrically bounded space from which the dancers could stare out into the distance but not escape. Jeffrey Pike, the third dancer, awoke into movement later, and all three seemed to strive towards a form of movement that would allow them to master the uncertainties of their bodies, which sometimes appeared to be hampered in ways that bewildered their owners.

To portray this surprise at the possibilities and limitations of the body requires technical control by the dancer, and this was evident. At one point the dancers appeared to be drawn upwards from above as they lay on their sides, an exhilarating illusion that testified to their skill.

Prologue, which followed, was a wonderful dance, a solo by Soll herself. It started to the vibrant music of Corelli, to which a strange figure, part simpleton in a smock, part witch casting her spells, darted on and began to spring and twirl with an exhilarating abandon. Working from a foundation of technical excellence, Soll's piece was particularly effective because it trod so delicately between different emotions, suggesting so many things, but always skipping one step ahead with a wit

that allowed the dancer to challenge the audience to make of it what they wanted.

One at first had the impression that we were spying on an intensely private performance; the delight of a slightly demented joker at the music and her uninhibited, almost naive response to it. But then, with her back to the audience, Soll suddenly turned her head over her shoulder to fix them with a knowing, conspiratorial gaze. This dancing fool was very well aware of being watched, and aware that her strange repetitions of movements that seemed to have such method in their madness were intriguing those watching.

This seemed to encapsulate so much of the delight of dance, starting in a musical surge, but then moving on, abandoning music to leave just a figure, dramatically cross-lit on the empty stage, exploring movements in the concentration of silence.

The third piece also originated as a solo by Soll, but in this production was danced by Melinda Sullivan. *Masque: Attempts to Fly* again achieved considerable beauty by leavening allusive scenes that took place in a charmed world not quite our own with a wit that reached to the audience beyond. Sullivan used a succession of different

forms of movement and props to attempt to fly — from flapping the arms to bouncing on a trampoline. Other props were used to good effect: a mask that turned Sullivan into a skipping child or puckish satyr, or a giant moon face which she wore as a costume at one point. Again, there would be the occasional stare straight at the audience to confound any complacency, here with an element of flirtation that went well with the childish stature of Sullivan, which was emphasized by setting tall, thin Lodi McClellan on stage in the role of a statuesque mentor.

A Shaker Dance itself honed the concern with ritualistic movement into something more overtly menacing, with the looming score of John Adams' *Shaker Loops* as accompaniment. Soll took a role a little apart from the rest of the company, dressed in black and hurrying with jutting neck around the perimeter of the elegant Shaker set by Katherine Finkelpearl, as though to limit the directions in which the sporadic, obsessive energies of the dancers might take them. It was a thrilling climax to a full evening.

Flying K's bring sparkle to Strand's 70th celebration

FLYING KARAMAZOV BROTHERS

At the Strand Theater, Dorchester.

November 12 and 13.

By MICHAEL J. GARRISON

THE STRAND THEATER CELEBRATED its 70th anniversary last weekend in a style which reflected the Strand itself — a bit of grand old class and a bit of modern inventiveness. Friday starred legendary blues and jazz singer Cab Calloway, a concert that I regretted missing very much. But Saturday and Sunday featured the "new vaudeville" juggling/comedy/theater group known as the Flying Karamazov Brothers, and they alone were definitely worth waiting around 70 years for.

Most people can't really stand to watch jugglers for more than about 15 minutes, but that's because most jugglers think that they should be trying to juggle. The Flying Ks understand that they are a bunch of remarkable jugglers who are trying to entertain an audience, and they'll do just about anything to accomplish that. I mean, just how many acts can dance about and juggle wonderfully while singing "We are the Very Model of a Modern Vaudeville Juggling Troupe"? Between singing (badly), juggling (fantastically), punning (horribly), and clowning around (lovably), they managed to charm and involve an audience which cheered and laughed along for about two hours.

The Brothers are Dmitri, Smerdyakov, Ivan, and Fyodor Karamazov (Paul David Magid, Sam Williams, Howard Jay Patterson, and Timothy Furst). From their real names it is obvious they are neither brothers nor Eastern Europeans — they formed their troupe on the campus of UC Santa Cruz and now live near Seattle. While rising in fame and popularity they spent several years on the streets and in the fairs up and down the West Coast. Eventually they made it to Hollywood (*Jewel of the Nile*), Broadway, and toured extensively with their shows *Juggling and Cheap Theatrics*, *Juggle and Hyde*, and *From the Closet of Dr. Karamazov*. Last summer they starred in and coproduced a Lincoln Center production of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, which was broadcast live on PBS.

More recently, former Brother Alyosha (Randy Nelson) retired to be able to spend more time with his family. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons they decided to create their new show, called *Club*, which they performed at the Strand.

The show opened (to the sound of nothing but swishing clubs and catching hands) with a demanding and impressive display of four-man team juggling which the Flying Ks call the square dance. This, however, turned out to be a sort of teaser, and the rest of the show purported to be a history of juggling, from the early (and easy) days to today.

"In the beginning there was nothing," said Dmitri, standing alone on the stage. "Then there was light. There was still nothing, but at least you could see it." Then (you knew it all along) there was juggling. But it was simple, only one man and

three clubs.

Dmitri wanted to make it more exciting, but since Ivan forbid him to add any clubs ("once you get four, then you need five, and six . . .") they added more people. First it was Ivan. He and Dmitri explained the Karamazov passing system, which consists of singles (clubs that spin once on their way between jugglers), doubles, triples, fish (clubs that don't spin), and Beowulfs (clubs that spin backwards). The audience was duly impressed with, but slightly bored by, the juggling display — until Dmitri slyly added that there was a sound associated with each of the passes.

interrupted the history of juggling — by proposing the Gamble. This Karamazov tradition (formerly known as the Challenge) pits the champion (Ivan) against the audience. The audience is encouraged to bring anything up to the stage — as long as it weighs more than an ounce, less than 10 pounds, and smaller than a breadbox. Then the champion has to juggle three of the offerings, which are chosen by audience applause. He has three chances to juggle them for a count of ten. Victory brings the coveted standing ovation, but the agony of defeat tastes a lot like cream pie.



"No, no," Ivan replied, "those are so silly. The audience doesn't want to hear them." But, of course, we did, and a routine juggling show suddenly became an entertaining display of sound, movement, humor, and zest.

"Part three," announced Ivan, was to add music to the juggling. "We will now attempt to juggle, play the harmonica, play the xylophone, dance, sing, and chew hardened day-old bubble gum, all at the same time!" As they rolled out the xylophone and strapped harmonicas to their faces, Dmitri turned towards the audience and remarked, "This trick is so difficult we had to grow extra brain hemispheres in order to do it. We keep them in our stupid hats." They slipped them on, (and later offered them for sale in the lobby.) Whether or not they utilized extra brain power, they certainly amazed the crowd by doing everything they had promised and more.

Suddenly, their old juggling professor (Ivan, I think) walked out on the stage and

Sunday's audience came prepared with (in no particular order): a birthday cake with lighted candles, a ½ gallon of milk, a plunger, a pink lawn flamingo, a doll that laughs diabolically when hit, an umbrella, a penguin doll on skis, a hanging plant, a Tupperware container (with no lid) full of spaghetti, and some water balloons. After quite a bit of clowning around and bad jokes (many involving the "Abuse-it" doll), the audience finally decided on its gauntlet — the cake, the plant, and the cold spaghetti.

Ivan stepped through the curtain and his face fell. "You had better bring me the official apron of the 1984 Olympics," he told Dmitri. The apron turned out to be a good move, since each of the three tried ended either in flying spaghetti or falling cake. Fyodor, who never speaks on stage, served up the dessert; but the audience awarded Ivan a standing ovation regardless.

Afterwards the stage looked like Hurri-

cane Joan had passed by, and the show went into one of its few slow moments. A whole routine about an animal trainer who paraded his "invisible killer fireflies" fell flat. But *Club* is a new show, and I assume it will be fine-tuned as the Ks tour.

After the short intermission, the Ks gave us a short jam session of drunks juggling bottles on garbage can lids. Which neatly faded into a Smerdyakov portrayal of Sam Spade, working on the case of the "Maltese Flagon." The stage darkened, and in a voice which sounded just like a guy named Smerdyakov Karamazov imitating Humphrey Bogart, he spoke to the audience: "I remember when I first saw the Flagon. It was in Odessa, back in '27. '27 was before they had sound, so nobody could talk and they all communicated with music. It was in a small antique store, and some punk was about to rearrange it over the owner's head. . . ."

The stage lights came up, and on walked Dmitri wearing a skull and crossbones T-shirt, accompanied by a wail of electric guitars. Ivan the shopowner and Fyodor his assistant formed the balance of a quartet which (each with his own music) pantomimed a skit about the assistant's desire to stack all of the bottles in the store (including the Flagon) on his nose. Again, this is probably something which will be tightened up a little as the tour goes on, since it was quite disjointed.

Finally, however, they got back to the history of juggling, and brought us to the modern era. In the jugglers' version of jazz, one man (Dmitri) stood some distance away from the other three, who stood in a line. Dmitri was the feeder and, like a jazz drummer, laid down the basic rhythm to which the others improvised. While each pass had to reach Dmitri in the same amount of time, there were no rules as to what the pass was like. The jugglers threw up whatever they felt like — Beowulfs, triples, behind the back passes, or simple fish — in whatever order Dmitri decided to feed them. Like jazz music, it was clear that the performers were having a whale of a good time; and like jazz music it was a not a big deal if somebody missed a beat.

Having completed their history, the Ks ended on a typically off-beat note. "For our grand finale," announced Ivan, "modern technology has made it possible for us to make music by repeatedly bashing ourselves in the head." They donned helmets equipped with electronic pickups and radio transmitters which sent a signal backstage to a synthesizer; the result of which was that each Karamazov could make a different note by hitting his head.

Just as the finale began Dmitri turned around and said, "We always get asked: 'Sure you can play jazz, but can you do something classical?'" Quickly they slipped into the "square dance" position with which they had started the show and performed the same demanding juggling which they had already done before. But this time they played "Ode to Joy," the fourth movement from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* — and left the stage to the sound of one more standing ovation.