

MARTHA BOWERS

DANCE • THEATRE • ETCETERA

THE PHOENIX March 22, 1990

'Paternalism' a Plus in Bowers' Dance-Theater Performance

BY BEVERLY SANCHEZ

He'lade, a Kwakiutl Indian word, means "having everything right," according to Kim Stafford, author of a book of essays on place which talks about the same kind of rightness of place, portable or otherwise, as evoked by Martha Bowers' Dance/Theatre/Etcetera performance at the Picnic House in Prospect Park on March 18.

As part of the performance, she created a special community-based project called "Root and Branch II" which involved seven fathers and seven sons, who although not professional dancers, danced with gusto and style.

The fathers and sons had been practicing together for over a month and were smooth and worked together as a unit. The audience from the first was on their side. The fathers, as well as the sons, were an assorted group. The dance was structured in a way as to look like play time and there was quite a bit of lifting as sons and the fathers flung them around beautifully with careful precise ease.

As the dance progressed there is a role reversal and for a short time the sons acted the part of Dad. The text used throughout the performance was written by three of the dads, Bob Armistead, Charles Flickinger and Ben Chu.

BLEND OF SENTIMENT AND STYLE

The theme of father-son bonding and paternal love is so simple and is presented here with such a blend of sentiment and style that Bowers should be congratulated for, first of all, gathering a collection of the most adorable children. Dharnam Singh quickly became an audience favorite after he first entered with his tall, red-bearded father, Siri Vishnu Khalsa, a contractor who runs Nanak's Construction. They were both wearing white turbans and carried wooden play swords. Dharnam looked as though he enjoyed performing as much as the audience liked watching him.

All of the performers were terrific and looked like they were having a ball. The pillow fight near the end had the look of a real enjoyable melee. Compliments should be paid to another of the dads, Charles Flickinger, who runs the Flickinger Glassworks in Williamsburgh, for the grace he showed, and

to his son, Nathan, who made things look effortless.

There was also dramatic talent evident as in the case of Ernest Porcelli and his son Ernest — known as Ernest and Ernest — who both delivered their lines well and with humor and also had wonderful facial expressions. Ernest, the son who was celebrating his birthday after the show, said that he "liked the pillow fight best."

JOYFUL, GLEEFUL AND INVOLVED

Being delightfully professional did not prevent the little boys from being joyful, gleeful, very involved throughout the final rehearsal last Tuesday and the Sunday performance — and thoroughly motivated. "Roots and Branches" says much for fathers who make such creative and productive use of the time they spend with their sons. It also speaks well of Bowers that she handles deep emotions with simplicity rather than saccharine and was still able to show the attachment the modern father can express for his child.

The music was timed to the mood of the piece perfectly with fiddle tunes and "Indian War Whoop" by Floyd Miny. Martha Bowers, a founding member of Dancers for Disarmament, explains one of the reasons she wanted to do this project is because "of the prejudice about men who dance all being gay and having AIDS." The original "Roots and Branches" was created in Wexford, Ireland for mothers and children.

Also on the Sunday afternoon program was "The Fine Art of Sauntering," created in 1988. It lived up to its name and made an art out of walking and living and thinking and just plain "having everything right," which it had, including the wonderful cooperation of movement between Martha Bowers and Hank Smith, a mime-actor-tap dancer-new vaudevillian-performance artist of such fluidity and imagination that you saw the road before him.

Bowers had such strong, beautiful movements and seemed to move both time and space with this composition. The music added to the atmosphere, as did the narration of going walking and the ways of walking and life.

SHOWS HER CLASSICAL TRAINING

"Kinder Komodie," created with the support of the Dance Theatre of Harlem's

choreography project and directed by Bessie Schoenberg, involved six dancers — three young men and three young women — and is funny, cute and well-costumed by Zelda Wynn. The music was by Mozart. Stacey Rivers was the lead dancer, and was outstanding and energetic. The smallest of dancers in this piece, she had fun mocking ballet in a way that shows off her classical training.

When asked about her dance style, Rivers said that she "has to be able to do everything." The 22-year-old dancer, a student at the Dance Theatre of Harlem School

The young people of the company were talented and unpretentious. They work naturally and effortlessly, to our eyes.

— admires Judith Jamison and enjoyed being in the show.

The young people of the company were talented and unpretentious. Four of them are from the Dance Theatre of Harlem School and two are from the dance program at SUNY at Purchase. They work as though they are a permanent company, natural and effortlessly to our eyes.

The last composition on the afternoon's program, "Bread," was interesting and had its moments. It involved four men baking bread and bonding. There was a lot of male aggression. The fact that these men were wearing kilts made it even more intriguing, but even though there were a lot of elements to catch your attention, parts of this dance seemed to drag and it became somewhat tedious. However, the effort made — like in the synchronized, semi-martial arts movements — had to be appreciated.

For the most part, Martha Bowers, who is a great storyteller, charmed, delighted and intrigued. She had mostly everything just right.

143 BOND STREET • BROOKLYN, N.Y. 11217 • (718) 858-0841