

CARL ORFF AND MARY WIGMAN HONORED WITH NEW WORKS IN PHILADELPHIA

by **Merilyn Jackson**

November 15, 2006

Girard College Chapel
Community Education Center
Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts
Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center

A new modern dance version of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* will take over one of Philadelphia's most spectacular performing spaces, Girard College Chapel this weekend. Built in the early 20th century it is shaped like an isosceles triangle with the tip cut off. Uplighting hidden along a ledge that rims the multilayered gilt ceiling is the sole source of light for the huge space. The mammoth roof is upheld by 30 goliath marble pillars, four in what would be the nave in a church, six to the back where a choir and organ might be and ten on each side. Now though, the college built out a large apron from the dais to form a stage. The organ is on a hydraulic lift and hidden behind marble that also conceals curved and cushioned rows of seating for a choir or a college of academics.

No religious accoutrements define the space to any one religion and neither does it seem Masonic. But it does have a spiritual feel and is the capstone of the college founded by financier Stephen Girard for the benefit of orphan boys in the 19th century. Girls have since assaulted Girard's dictum and conquered its high walls to study there as well.

Now, Leah Stein is the girl scaling its walls for the gargantuan purpose of creating the new *Carmina*. At least the seasoned choreographer still looks like a girl, although for this task she seems to have a backbone of steel and the wisdom of a high priestess.

In 2005, Frostburg State University in Maryland commissioned Stein to mount the new *Carmina* and the piece premiered there last fall. At rehearsal on the Monday before opening in Philadelphia, she confessed the commission was a surprise. "Are you sure you want me," she asked? "Have you seen my work?" They assured her she was who they wanted.

Stein's work is largely contact, weight and support-based and improvisational. So much so that even four days before opening, Stein was trying out new approaches to utilize the gift of this monumental space. With no wings to work behind on stage, her dancers enter from the side halls, stealthily creeping over the low walls. Later she tries it another way.

The sound engineer plays a section of music repeatedly until a dance phrase is considered finished. Positioning and repositioning their weight against each other, it looks like the dancers' limbs and torsos are pulled and pushed along by unseen forces.

Two grand pianos and percussion instruments fit closely near the altar space where Alan Harler, director of the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, will conduct his forces. Press contact for the choir, alto Lynn Faust slides into a pew next to me and explains that their budget would not have supported full orchestral accompaniment, but that the instrumentation and voices they have gathered should fill the space. "We expect the club to be about 120 strong," she said, "and then there will be the Temple Children's Choir for the three sections that require a children's chorus."

It was the Mendelssohn Club, which has performed at the chapel, who steered Stein to the space. To

help with the acoustics, "We had these velvet curtains hung all around," said Faust pointing to what seems like a Cristo-sized wrap of the interior. "And we're hoping that we get a large enough audience to help absorb sound."

Orff's music, with its cumulative effect of rhythmic ostinato (repetition) demands a physical response. So, what does a dancer/choreographer who rarely works with music for inspiration do with this kind of big sound? Stein went with Orff's rhythms and against them, finding their underground, making it metaphorically site-specific.

At a break, Stein says that she first started working with Orff's solo voice sections for baritone, tenor and soprano. "Once I got those going, the rest started to come to me too," she said. "Every section has an arc, a beginning middle and end, so I can work off that."

As we speak, lighting designer Troy Martin-O'Shia (who lit Boathouse Row) and his crew weave in and around the pillars above setting up the lighting. Everything had to be brought in. Asked how he could possibly complete this in five days, he said, "We have to. We got a great cut on the cost by shaving off last weekend and starting today. We'll be ready."

MARY WIGMAN'S 120TH BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY WITH BRIGITTA HERRMANN

A true dance jewel will be tucked into a much humbler setting over the same weekend. At West Philadelphia's small black-box theater at Community Education Center, German-born and trained dancer/choreographer Brigitta Herrmann organized a group piece with seven women who will dance in the spirit of Mary Wigman to honor her birth date.

Herrmann came to the U.S. from the dance company Motion Berlin in 1968 and founded Group Motion in Philadelphia with Hellmut Gottschild and Manfred Fischbeck, who is now artistic director. In 1987, she founded Ausdruckstanz Dance Theater with Michael Carson and after a few years of lying fallow, has now reinvented it as Imprints In Motion.

For this project, Imprints In Motion brings together Sandy Broyard and Sarah Manno who each studied with Wigman in 1960; Mary Anne Santos Newhall, whose book about Wigman was published by Routledge Press; and Barabra Dilley, Vickie Seitchick and Sheila Zagar – all devotees of Wigman's expressionistic dance style.

Santos Newhall has reconstructed Wigman's 1926 *Witch Dance*. "It's one of the few dances that we have a fragment of on film," says Herrmann. "So we have it in our memory and Mary Anne was able to reconstruct it with that and other archival material." So quite a bit of history to take in at the CEC with this group of dedicated dancers.

This week in Philadelphia, you can also see Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal at Annenberg and Philadanco at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater.

Leah Stein Dance Company

Carmina Burana

Nov. 17-18, 8 pm

Girard College Chapel

Girard and Corinthian Avenues

Tickets: \$21 in advance, \$25 at door

Ticket Philadelphia, 215-893-1999 or

Mendelssohn Club: www.mcchorus.org

For more info: 215-735-9922

Brigitta Herrmann, Imprints In Motion

Nov. 18, 8pm, Nov. 19, 2pm
Community Education Center

35th and Lancaster

For tickets and info call: 215-438-2744

Les Grands Ballets de Canadiens de Montreal

Nov. 16-18, 7:30pm

Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

Dance Celebration Nov. 16-18, 7:30pm

Info: 215.898.3900 or Penn Presents

Philadanco

Nov. 16th & 17th, 7:30 p.m., Nov. 18th, 2:30 p.m. & 7:30 p.m., 19th, 2:30 p.m.

Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts

260 South Broad Street

Phila., PA 19102

Tickets: 215-893-1999

www.kimmelcenter.org