

Review/Dance

## A Premiere Palpable With Desire

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

When she is good, she is very, very good. "Sextet," Twyla Tharp's latest premiere, is an inspired piece of work, a laid-back tropical equivalent of the love dances she created in her big hit, "Nine Sinatra Songs."

Sex is not what this shimmering, successful "Sextet" for six dancers is about. But desire is very much present in the new piece, performed Thursday night by Twyla Tharp and Dancers at the City Center (131 West 55th Street). One could imagine invisible fans whirling overhead as the women dipped and arched in their partners' embraces to an equally inspired original score by Bob Telson.

Hand in hand, the choreography and the music add up to a potent atmosphere. There is some help from David Finn's lighting and from Santo Loquasto, who has ingeniously costumed the men in white pants and suspenders over pink shirts. The women wear chiffonlike wraparound dresses to swish over their pink leotards. They are on toe.

While ballet as a rule is predicated on a centered body, Miss Tharp is enamored of the off-center figure. The key to her ballet pieces is their play with imbalance. Here, as always, the pelvis is often thrust forward and ballet steps are performed inversely, or in reverse from the usual way.

"Sextet" is essentially a tour de force. It is marked by formidable dancing but masquerades as escapist entertainment. The choreography is complex, difficult to execute, crammed with accelerated steps and unconventional partnering.

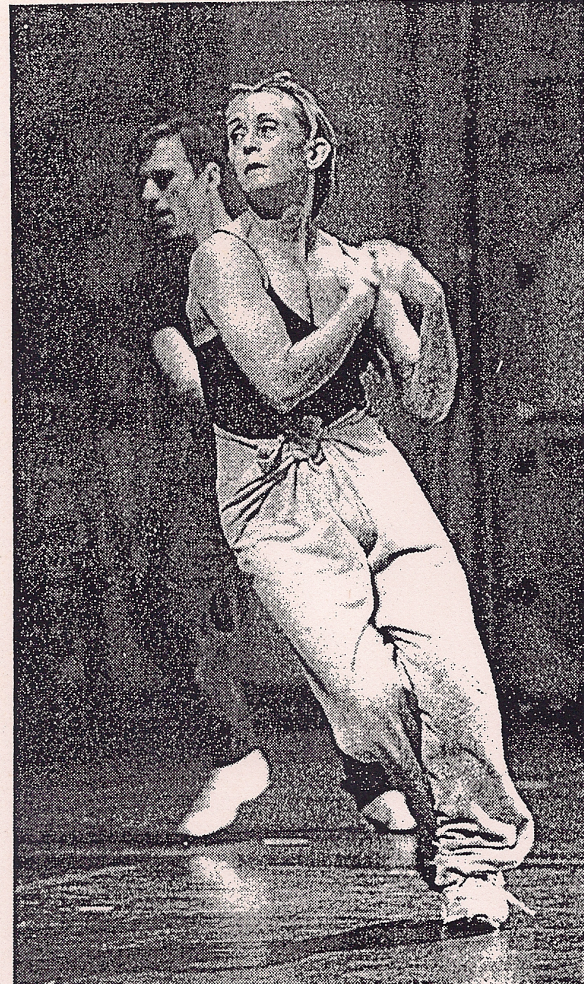
In this newly formed group, the men are stronger than the women. Robert La Fosse, a guest from the New York City Ballet, throws himself into every piece on every program. But here, his constant attention to nuance also adds up to a sensational feat of characterization within dancing. Watch him hug his fists to his chest in exhilarated lust as he goes after his girl.

As for the male dancers on loan from the Paris Opera Ballet, they couldn't be better. Lionel Delanoé could be easily picked out of the corps when he appeared in New York with the Paris company in 1986. This was not because he has red hair but because, even in an entire corps of red-haired dancers, his fusion of energy and classical form would stand out. The surprise is how naturally he and Stéphane Elizabé, who has developed into a witty virtuoso, have taken to the Americanisms of Miss Tharp's style.

The choreographer also brings out the best in her women in "Sextet." Isabelle Guérin, a Paris star, comes into her own here deliciously. She enters with a huge jeté that covers the stage. Her hair in bangs and in a topknot, she sways her hips and her skirts with a touch of sexy coquettishness to entice Mr. La Fosse into a continuing romance.

Mr. Telson's tuneful suite has a magic rooted deeply in Argentine tangos, complete with the sound of the accordionlike bandoneón. If the dominant beat is Latin, Mr. Telson's eclectic mix also leads him loosely into Caribbean and even Middle Eastern genres; a carnival rhythm accompanies one of Miss Tharp's most complicated ensembles.

Her imagery originally coincides with the music. Mr. La Fosse turns



Martha Swope

Twyla Tharp performing in "Men's Piece" at the City Center.

A Tharp evening, with steps, as usual, in reverse.

into a flamenco dancer. Mr. Delanoé and Delphine Moussin perform a stylized tango. But there is also a wonderful moment when four of the dancers seem to be fighting a tropical storm. Rooted to the spot, they stretch out an arm that seems blown back by the wind.

Mr. Elizabé and Allison Brown as well as Mr. Delanoé and Miss Moussin, who is also from Paris, plunge impressively into the start of the ballet with their tricky partnering. Amid the fouettés and arabesques, there is the key image of the men bending over the women encircled in their arms. At the very close, all six dancers end with a more ecstatic version of the same embrace.

The program included the season's first performance of "The Golden Section." Once the apotheosis of the full-length 1981 "Catherine Wheel,"

this pure-dance excerpt to David Byrne's score brought out both newcomers and Tharp veterans. Keith Young, Kevin O'Day and Jamie Bish-ton were in the latter category, as punchy and reckless as ever. But much of the old disco drive that propelled the pelvis-gyrating ensemble was understandably reduced to caution by some of the others. The cast also included Mr. Elizabé, Mr. La Fosse, Michael Whaites, Mauri Cramer, Jodi Melnick, Miss Brown, Stacy Caddell, Amy O'Brien, Shawn Stevens and Paul Lester.

Miss Tharp was as funny as ever in a repeat of "Men's Piece," her hilarious if somewhat superficial analysis of male-female relationships. The waltz who waltzed through Gershwin's "He Loves, She Loves" with Mr. O'Day was also the foil to Mr. O'Day in drag as a football widow while Tammy Wynette sang "Stand by Your Man" on tape. Miss Tharp was the choreographer barking orders to a spiffy male quartet as Gershwin's "Strike Up the Band" led into a memorable and tumbling improvisatory duet with Mr. O'Day, accompanied not so ironically by Cole Porter's "Do I Love You?"