

## Free at last: Störing Dance Theater scores stellar success with work on Underground Railroad

By PAUL HORSLEY  
The Kansas City Star

**Dance can be an ideal way to deal with subjects so potent we can't look them in the face without flinching.**

Störing Dance Theater's "Underground," which received its premiere Friday at the Lyric Theatre, is a two-hour choreographic treatment of slavery, brutality, faith and the work of the Underground Railroad.

But it is neither sensationalistic nor exploitative of the senses, and it tells its story with an eye for historical accuracy.

***It is without doubt one of the most vivid, heartfelt and theatrically astute pieces of dance theater ever to grace a Kansas City stage,*** and it's an ideal testament to what a small local company can achieve with talent, imagination and lots of hard work.

More than two years in the making, it is fundamentally an intimate story that follows the lives of Jed and Sari, slaves who escape their brutal plantation owner with the help of Quakers whose faith compels them to fight the evils of slavery.

Mona Störing-Enna and her co-choreographer, Tobin James, tell the story with dance and theater, displaying a knack for stagecraft and drama equal to any choreographer I can think of.

After the big plantation number in Act 1, for example, we need an intimate solo to work through the tragedy we've just seen. So we're given James' big explosive scene in which she mourns her husband with Martha Graham-like histrionics.

There are hints of Alvin Ailey, too, whom it was hard not to think of during the moving and witty church scene of Act 2.

Ballet was never far from the surface, either, especially in the beautifully gauged large-ensemble numbers like the opening scene — an ingenious, layered tableau with women picking cotton in unison and men breaking the earth like unearthly human machines.

**The lead dancers exuded personality. James as Sari is a consummate dancer who wrapped us around her character, and Marc Wayne had a charisma that was both harrowing and uplifting.**

Courtney Kierl-Bourman brought groundedness to her portrayal as Hannah, the Quaker who risks her life to lead the slaves to freedom. Her trios with James and Wayne, which grow increasingly passionate and hopeful as they near their goal, were among the highlights.

The spare sets included a pair of large panels that doubled as a storefront or, when flipped, the church interior. Six simple benches were pews, which were "danced with" stylishly.

**There were remarkable moments throughout:** When learning of the death of Sari's husband, the slaves must keep serving at the ball through their grief, intermittently breaking out in unison shivers.

A whole miniature history of the Underground Railroad is compressed cleverly in a few scenes. We see the slaves guided by signals like lamps in windows, or escaping slave-hunters by hiding under a quilt being sewn by a quilting circle.

Jay Pfeifer's score combined Philip Glass-like cascades with spirituals, folk dance, choral singing, African drumming and a host of other things. It felt surprisingly organic, though: In fact it was so good that I found myself wishing he'd orchestrate the synthesized parts for real instruments.

The finale of "Underground" some might question: The cast comes out in modern dress and dances in jubilation at how far we've come. Seeing the cast suddenly transformed into hip, fresh-faced suburbanites was pretty effective, but the brief vignettes telling the "history" of black advancement struck me as a tad quaint.

It was saved from looking like a scene from "Hair" — just barely — by its use of hymns instead of "Let the Sunshine In."

That was only a brief lapse in an otherwise brilliant production. "Underground" is a piece that works because it can be both literal and nonliteral at the same time.

It treats a tough subject with sensitivity, grace and a sharp sense of how art can feed life and vice-versa.

By Paul Horsley

Ten Years, Ten Cheers:  
Best Moments of the  
Decade for Kansas City  
Music and Dance



It was a rough decade for America, as the geopolitical fallout from 9/11 was followed by a frightening economic downturn. All this had a momentous impact on philanthropic giving, and the arts suffered consequently. Yet local arts groups managed to steer a reasonable course, scoring remarkable moments despite conservative trends. I arrived in Kansas City in February 2000 and have seen it all (well, almost). Here is my list of Top Ten Music and Dance Moments of the "Aughts." I've tried to represent the major performing arts groups and presenters, but I've also included some "runners-up." Let me know if I've left out your favorite moment.

10. Sometimes a single piece on a program stands out, even when you can't remember anything else about the concert. One of the most bracing performances of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony I've ever heard was at a Kansas City Chamber Orchestra concert in September 2002. Conductor Bruce Sorrell led an ensemble of 35 or so local musicians in a fresh rendering that was light on its feet in the best "authentic" tradition but imbued with warmth and flexibility.

9. A brilliant smaller dance company here is Störbling Dance Theater, founded by Mona Störbling-Enna, which caught my attention with *The Prodigal Daughter* in 2000 and astonished me again in 2005 with *Underground*. This full-length piece about the historical activities of the Underground Railroad, choreographed by Mona and Tobin James, was "one of the most vivid, heartfelt, and theatrically astute pieces of dance theater ever to grace a Kansas City stage," as I wrote. (Runners-up, among smaller dance groups: Mary Pat Henry's *Travis*, created for her Williams/Henry Contemporary Dance Company.)

8. The Kansas City Choral has scored numerous home runs over the years, but the one I remember with most clarity was the April 2005 concert at the just-restored Visitation Church, where Charles Bruffy and his Grammy-winning Choral were joined by British-based Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. Their rendering of Scottish composer James MacMillan's dazzling *O Bow Jesu*, "had a mind-blowing clarity," as I wrote, "that confirmed my belief that this work is a modern masterpiece." (Runner-up: Octarium's October 2008 concert.)

7. Dance companies rarely collaborate, but the teaming-up of Jawole Wilka Jo Zollar's Urban Bush Women and Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny's *Compagnie Jant-Bi* in spring of 2008 produced pure gold. Their *The Scales of Memory* was a powerful, vivid piece exploring gender, history and commonalities between Africans and African Americans; the dance was delightful and infectious dance, part African dance, part American contemporary.

6. The Harriman-Jewell Series has been responsible for many of the memorable moments of the decade, but if I had to choose one it would be tenor Ben Heppner's solo recital at the Folly Theater in November 2005. The greatest living heldentenor, singing at his prime. If Luciano Pavarotti was sunshine and Plácido Domingo is burnished wood, then Heppner is "like a full-bodied Cabernet," I wrote at the time. (Runners up: Stefan Jacsów performing the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in November 2006; tenor Juan Diego Flórez's appearances on the Harriman series, most recently in spring 2008; Yuri Temirkanov conducting the St. Petersburg Philharmonic in November 2004.)

5. The Kansas City Symphony under Michael Stern has grown steadily, but even before he arrived, then-assistant conductor Timothy Hankewich led one of the finest performances of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* I've heard. The soprano in this November 2002 concert was the incomparable Christine Brewer — a perfect case of rapport between singer, conductor and orchestra. (Runner-up: mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson with the Symphony in Verdi's *Requiem* in May 2001.)

4. The Kansas City Ballet scored a number of hits this decade, and it has emerged as one of the great American ballets under William Whitener artistic direction. It was William's full-length *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that first dazzled me with the company's capabilities when I saw it in 2002. It featured two dozen top young



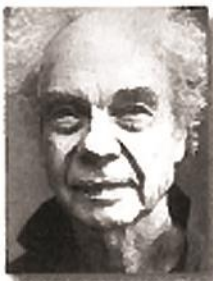
Urban Bush Women

dancers, including an indelible Christopher Barckdale a Symphony and Kansas City Choral performing Mendelssohn Robert Olson's baton, and dazzling sets and costumes. (Runners-up: *Nine Sinatra Songs*; Yuri Possokov's *Firebird*.)

3. Likewise the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has scored Holmquist's direction. From a theatrical standpoint, I Strassberger's production Thomas' *Hamlet* (November operatic moment of the decade. But from a musical standpoint Beinen's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the most scintillating Mechem's *John Brown*; Joyce DiDonato in Rossini's *La season's Tosca* with Greer Grimsley.)

2. Certain musical or dramatic moments will, I'm certain, I can still remember, the exact sensation of listening to perform Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in 2005 for Cynth Chamber Music series. Here was one of the great Bach performing one of the most complex, sublime works of We breath for its entire hour-long duration. (Runners-up on Sie String Quartet's *Art of Fugue* project; pianist Ivan Mora Orion String Quartet's Beethoven cycle.)

1. Merce Cunningham, who died in July, might be described as visionaries of American culture, and his visits to the I Johnson County Community College were mind-bending. February 2003 of *Interscape* was one of the most moving had. It's hard to describe the sensation of three dancers to the stage, to the music of John Cage and décor a Rauschenberg, but it amounted to a perfect amalgam of somehow just made sense. It's as memory as anything I've ever experienced JCCC: Paul Taylor's *Promenade* performed by the Paul Taylor Dance



Merce Cunningham

Merce Cunningham  
*Interscape*



To reach Paul Horsley,  
send email to

*Soprano's Gracings*—The Harriman-Jewell Series' 45th on February 13, with violinist Rachel Lee in a free DIs "Prime tickets at home" at [hjsseries.org](http://hjsseries.org) or call 816-415-50



## Ballet's beautiful anguish takes wing

By MICKEY COALWELL, K.C.Star

**A** ballet on the subject of Alzheimer's disease may not sound very promising, but Friday's night's performance of "Butterfly" by the Störing Dance Theater at the Folly Theater was one of those **rare occasions when an artistic gamble really paid off.**

**Thanks to the guiding vision of choreographer and artistic director Mona Störing-Enna, "Butterfly" tells a very human story with pathos, intelligence, humor and guts. "Butterfly" is a totally successful piece of dance theater.**

"Butterfly" is the fictional story of Helen Bernard, magnificently portrayed with grace, economy and deep understanding by veteran dancer Peggy Ply, and her descent into the confusion, pain and anguish of terminal Alzheimer's. Helen's adult daughter, danced by Anne Wayne, must deal with her mother's progressive deterioration. Wayne's characterization, all elbows and angles, is perfect.

The ballet is set almost exclusively to the music of Philip Glass, except for the lengthy memory sequence that uses the New Age-classical fusion of Libera. The music is extraordinarily well-chosen, acting as a superb backdrop for the dramatic action.

Without detracting from the inherent seriousness of her subject, Störing-Enna offers moments of both spectacle and humor. "To the City" features some wonderful costumes and choreography, reminiscent of "An American in Paris" with a multiethnic flavor. "Meals on Wheels" is a manic, hilarious commentary on the starched and smilingly inhuman medical practitioners who, with the best of intentions, often rob those in their care of dignity. It's both funny and chilling.

"A New Home," "Entering the Assisted Living Home" and "Last Visit" complete Helen's story, but now told from her point of view, as we watch her relive her life in memory, first as a young girl, as a bride in the first bloom of womanhood, as a radiantly pregnant mother-to-be, and as a mature woman among close friends and family. It is a most poignant and touching journey, danced with imagination and artistry by the young company and several talented guest artists.

Scenery and lighting, though minimal, were highly effective. The memory sequence introduces huge, rainbow-hued gauze cones from which each of Helen's life incarnations steps forth. The significance of the ballet's enigmatic title becomes clear in the final scene, "Metamorphosis," when these cones become gigantic streamers, spreading forth triumphantly from Helen's spiritually resurrected form like wings.

Kansas City Star, The (MO)

June 9, 2003

Section: FY1

Edition: METROPOLITAN

Page: D3

Troupe blends variety of styles into rich stew

PAUL HORSLEY  
*The Kansas City Star*

Storling Dance Theater

Reviewed: Saturday, June 7, at the Lyric Theatre

Attendance: 750 (approx.)

Whatever else you might say about the Storling Dance Theater, there's certainly no other dance company in Kansas City quite like it. On Saturday at the Lyric Theatre, the small troupe founded in 1998 made **a bold step forward in the local dance arena with a program that highlighted its emerging skill and unique eclecticism.**

Storling mixes modern dance with classical, mime, jazz and several types of world dance, all in a spirit of Euro-chic into which are woven religious themes. It uses excellent young dancers, including past and present members of the Kansas City Ballet.

Saturday's first half of short pieces featured Stephen Wynne's "Stargazing," with exultant women "voguing" in angular poses, and Amy Meyers' "Cleansing," where mournful, hair-bedecked figures strive toward a purifying bowl of holy water. Most appealing was Steve Rooks' tightly danced "In a Flash," with slinky swans strutting to a clear structural logic. Tenor Nathan Granner and guitarist Beau Bledsoe performed songs between the brief pieces, presumably to give the dancers a rest.

The centerpiece of this program was the ambitious, 75-minute "The Prodigal Daughter" a vividly detailed biblical retelling by company co-founder Mona Storling-Enna that uses a huge palette of styles, moods, music and visuals. In the prodigal's family home, for example, a pastel-clad ensemble dances Salome-like to vaguely Middle Eastern music. Then, as the daughter descends into worldliness, she's confronted by pink-garbed babes, women in weirdly short hoop skirts and metallic-clad high priestesses of party life.

And that's just the beginning. We also get tango, dance-hall, hip-hop, Irish and African styles, to name a few. There's also a pole dance, love, loss and poverty. The daughter's return home features an arresting image of father and daughter on a moving dais, re-crossing the River Styx as it were.

If it sounds like a lot, it was. Apart from the dizzying mix of styles, many of the individual sequences went on too long. **But the piece was so ingeniously executed that it maintained the interest. Storling-Enna's choreographic invention seemed to have no limits, and the costumes, lighting and stage designs were full of whimsy and fun.**

**The dancing was pretty remarkable, too,** especially that of the versatile Jeanene Winston as the daughter. "The Prodigal Daughter" might be a diamond in the rough, but it's a piece I'd go see again.

To reach Paul Horsley, classical music critic, call (816) 234-4764 or send e-mail to phorsley@kcstar.com.

Photo (color)

The **Storling Dance** Theater

## Local performances make up more than half of year's music and dance highlights

By PAUL HORSLEY  
The Kansas City Star

What's most notable about the year's highlights is that eight of the 15 on the list are concerts by *local* musicians or organizations. That should explode the notion that you're more likely to have a good experience at a concert of touring international artists.

### Moments of note

Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Carlsen Center, Feb. 12-15. On the other hand, a slew of fans came out for the brilliant company of America's guru of contemporary dance. Cunningham was on hand for the three performances, and he brought artworks and groupies along with him. On Feb. 12 they performed a one-time-only "Event" in the Carlsen lobby. Their fabulously detailed performance of "Interscape," which included conceptual, abstract dance that was nevertheless deeply humane, counts among the most exalted moments of my adult life.

David Parsons Dance Company, Harriman Arts Program, Nov. 22. Kansas City native Parsons brings an element to dance that many choreographers have forgotten: whimsy. But he makes serious pieces out of it, like "Too Many Cooks" and "Slow Dance," not to mention the ever-dazzling coup de theatre, "Caught." I'm not usually one to beam with pride over native sons, since they usually don't get great until they leave Kansas City. But Parsons has an artistry that is grounded in the best of Midwestern directness and dry humor, and he's always welcome here.

**"The Prodigal Daughter," Störling Dance Theater, June 7.** This arresting piece of choreography by Mona Störling-Enna used a whole universe of dance styles and moods to create a piece of biblical inspiration with universal appeal. The piece did to the Prodigal Son tale what "The Wise Women" did to the Nativity story but with more youthful energy. The level of dancing for this fledgling company was remarkably high: We hope to see more of it soon.

To reach Paul Horsley, classical music critic, call **(816) 234-4764**, or send e-mail to [phorsley@kcstar.com](mailto:phorsley@kcstar.com).