

francesca

Ever since she found her voice, R'n'B it is for the ex-Forsythe dancer. She tells Susan Yung, how she likes to throw herself in a different direction, and how to mix genres successfully

Francesca Harper, when did you begin singing in performance? Years ago with the Frankfurt Ballet. William Forsythe asked me to sing in some of his productions and when he heard that I had a voice, he started creating roles for me that required singing. A producer came to one of the performances and asked me if I wanted to start recording, so that's when I started recording.

What pieces by Forsythe included these vocalizations? "Isabella's Room" was one; "Sleepers Guts" and "Alien/A(c)tion" were other productions I sang in ...

Have you been trained vocally? I have, I've done a lot of training. Especially since I've been back in New York.

Are any of your current performances just dance or singing now? I combine the genres all the time if I'm creating my own work on my own company. If I'm doing a commission for a company, I'll do a straight dance piece.

So when you choose your company members, they have to both sing and dance? Sometimes I hire some that don't, but pretty much all my dancers now require either acting and dancing, or singing and dancing. So they have to be multifaceted. It also helps them trust themselves more, and creates this vulnerability, that usually if you're dancing and mastering things, doesn't exist.

It's a different approach to performing? Exactly. It forces you to think differently, which is something that you're not necessarily accustomed to, which I like – to kind of throw them in a different direction.

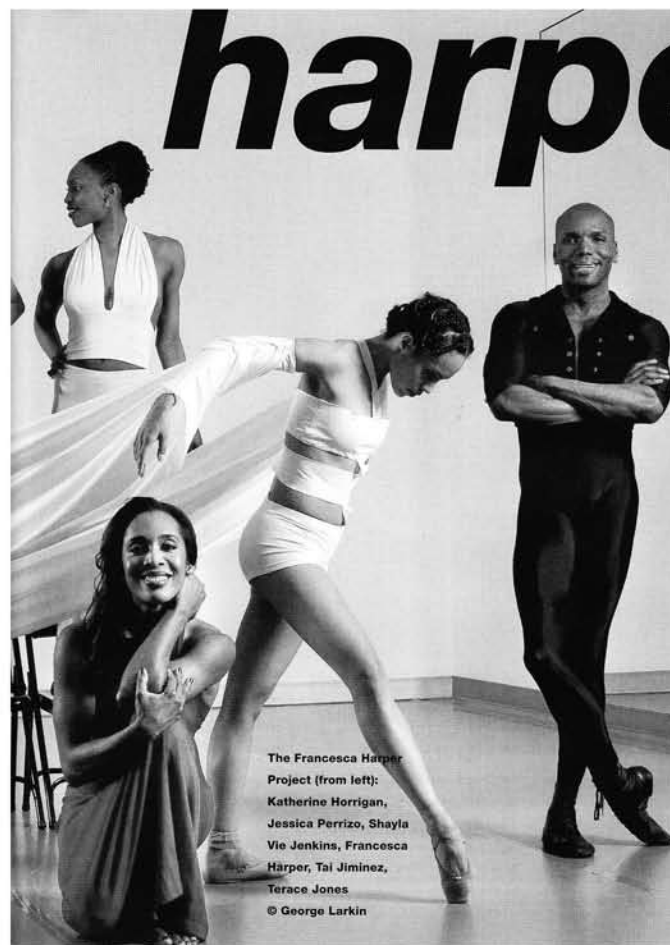
It seems that ballet – even concert dance – and pop singing are far apart in terms of audiences. Are you finding common ground? I am. We just

performed at the Holland Dance Festival, and we got standing ovations both nights. An incredible experience. I got some feedback from other audience members here in New York – they feel that they can really connect to it because not everybody who comes to see dance is necessarily a dance connoisseur. Sometimes they're friends of dance lovers who come to see the performance, or people who are new that want to take a chance, and one man – it was kind of poignant – said having been offered the different genres, he really felt included. It kind of related to things he'd seen in his life already. One of my main goals is to make dance and theater more accessible without losing their integrity and intellect.

And how are more traditional dance audiences receiving your work that includes singing? It's changing all over the map. Bill [Forsythe] started doing it. Jiri Kylián, Ohad Naharin also mix genres – including a lot of acting and speaking. Dancers are starting to get used to text, as more people are incorporat-

ing it in their pieces. Even in curriculums, you'll see it at ABT, Alley, Julliard – they're doing improvisation classes, and singing. It's becoming more integrated. Audiences are getting used to having a mixture.

It seems that you're striving to also entertain people, and not just raise questions they can't answer. Be a little provocative – I learned that from Bill. Being entertaining and being provocative work well together. A couple of pieces, when I first came back to the States, were generally more provocative and heavier in content, and the reactions – the critics, even the audience – were like, "I don't get it, I don't understand." I wanted to make it more accessible.



The Francesca Harper Project (from left): Katherine Horrigan, Jessica Perrizo, Shayla Vie Jenkins, Francesca Harper, Tai Jimenez, Terrace Jones © George Larkin

When you have choreography and singing, as in the solstice performance you recently did in Times Square, is the choreography an expression of or reaction to the lyrics, or a simple physical expression? Sometimes it's more abstract; sometimes there's a direct connection to the lyrics. Sometimes you just feel that a movement works with the synergetic value, and you don't need to have it relate to the lyrics. It depends on the moment and the song.

You are currently in "The Color Purple on Broadway," and have performed extensively in musical theater. Do forms like that, and opera, which alternate and blend dance and music, serve as models for where your work is going? Singing every night has strengthened my voice. That's why I got into musical theater. But of course there are

the economic requirements of living in New York. Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey, who started on Broadway, used the money to fund their own work. So I thought this would be a great place for me to improve my singing, learn about acting, and use some of the extra money for my own work, following their example. And yes, I think that musical theater and opera have had an influence on how I form my work.

Wouldn't you like to create a Broadway-type show, in your own voice and choreography? Absolutely, I've thought about it. I've put it off because I'm such a product of the concert dance world, and I just keep getting work with more concert dance. It's daunting putting on a production and trying to get backing. And it's disheartening to really work on something and not have it ever manifest itself. I would be terribly disappointed if that happened to me. So I'm reluctant. There are so many choreographers focusing on musical theater, and they're really good at what they do. While I know I'm good with concert dance. Maybe in the next couple of years, though.

In America, it seems that people have become slightly obsessed with the ability to sing and dance, judging from the popularity of "American Idol" and "Dancing with the Stars." Perhaps there is hope for talent like yours to go nationwide big-time. Would you want that kind of exposure? I sort of enjoy "So You Think You Can Dance," the show. The dancers were obviously good, and for them to get that kind of attention ... That's what I was talking about with an audience member who came to see my show, saying "I al-

ways felt that dance was above me and I could never know anything about it." But people do! Some of my friends have been on that show. Jason Samuels Smith was on there tapping; my friend Titus was on there doing African dance; and I was like: Wow!, they're really great. As long as the artists are getting paid properly, I wholeheartedly approve.

And billions of people are watching! But you never know what kind of contracts they have with the artists ... I'm working now on a television show that will be on the Arts & Culture channel – MNN, we're airing three episodes. The first one is going to be primarily my music videos that are kind of wacky and weird and wild, and the second one will be a documentary focusing on the preparations for a project I'm bringing to Harlem Stage in April; in the third one, I'm going to be showing the live performance at Harlem Stage. So funny you say that because it's what I was thinking – television is a great way to have exposure nationwide.

Besides the performing side of things, which you clearly excel at, you also have to market your work online – YouTube, your website, etc. ... I have a promotion manager at Sozo Media, Rika Iino. She's fabulous. Years ago, she said this is the way to go: get your stuff out on the internet – and it works. People can see what you're doing, that you're out there, working hard. I think we've been working at it about three years now. People have been calling about the company. I've gotten work via email. Amazing. A couple of years ago, I was doing cold calls, hoping someone would respond. Now people call me. And what's wonderful about it, too, is just being in touch with my friends internationally. People are emailing me from Germany, France. And we can look at each other's work on YouTube. It just makes everything a lot faster.

For more information on Francesca Harper and her work, go to: www.myspace.com/harperlounge and www.francescaharper.com