the *2009* DANCE MAGAZINE *AWARDS*

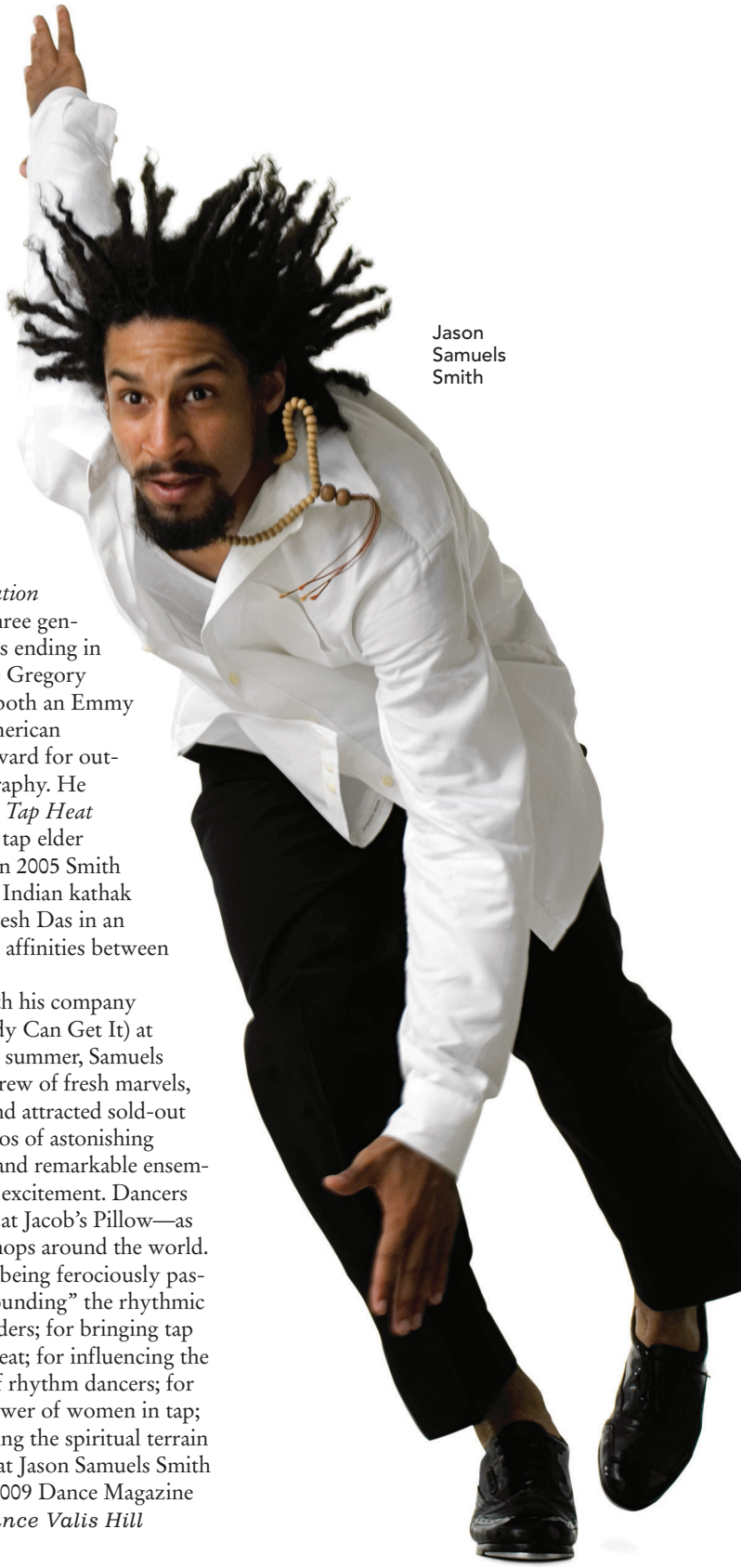
We love giving out awards because it's an opportunity to honor some of the greats in our field. Each of the recipients has made a contribution to dance that is both unique and outsized: Jason Samuels Smith, the hard-hitting tapper who cares about community; Allegra Kent, a legendary ballerina who now teaches, coaches, and writes; Ohad Naharin, who revolutionized international dance; and Sara Rudner, who gave postmodernism a spiritual, ecstatic element. Please join us on Nov. 9 for the Awards ceremony (see page 52 for details).

Jason Samuels Smith

He moves like bolts of lightning, spewing rhythms from his feet like African talking drums. His peers call him Iron Man, for the hard-and-fastness of his taps and steeliness of his convictions. Others call him irrepressible, rambunctious, and brutally charming. Hammering his piston-driven rhythms as if delivering his beats to freedom, Jason Samuels Smith is the John Henry of tap. He has helped to forge rhythm tap as a cutting-edge dance form on the American stage.

Growing up in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan, Samuels Smith studied jazz, tap, and ballet in Frank Hatchett's Professional Children's Program at Broadway Dance Center. His mother, Sue Samuels, was a jazz dancer and master teacher; his father, Joseph "Jo Jo" Benjamin Smith, was a jazz dancer and choreographer who was a consultant for the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever*. Jo Jo and Sue were co-directors of Jo Jo's Dance Factory, predecessor to BDC. A more serious interest in tap was ignited in Samuels Smith when Savion Glover began teaching master classes at BDC. It burst into flame in 1996 when, at the age of 15, Smith joined the cast of Glover's *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*.

Jayme Thornton for Dance Teacher



Jason Samuels Smith

He was part of a fresh young crew of male dancers who brought the raucousness of rhythm tap to blasting proportion with a flat-footed, emphatic style.

Samuels Smith at the time may have looked like Glover (his hair dreaded, his pants baggy) and sounded like him, but he soon began to distinguish himself. He became an avid collector of film clips of rhythm tap masters ("Peg Leg" Bates, Bunny Briggs, Chuck Green, Gregory Hines, Jimmy Slyde, Dianne Walker), which he stored in his iPod and viewed at every waking moment. He also began listening to the music of jazzmen Art Tatum, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie. In 2003, he co-organized the first annual L.A. Tap Fest with Chloe Arnold. Dance critic Jane Goldberg wrote of his performance that year, "He has invented a whole new vocabulary of rapid fire heels and toes." It was a strikingly aggressive style that was full of complex syncopations and stabbing staccato phrases.

Samuels Smith had also begun an investigation into his roots as a socially conscious African American performance artist. Tap's tradition could never be separated from a long history of hardship, from slavery to blackface. "Being a tap dancer represents all of those struggles," he says, "and I feel a commitment, personally, to the title 'tap dancer.' " Seeking to balance the artistic and social integrity of the form with its commercial viability, Samuels Smith pushed to expand tap's possibilities and emerged as a leader in the art form—as performer, choreographer, and director.

In 2003, he choreographed the opening number on the *Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Association Telethon*—with three generations of dancers ending in a salute to the late Gregory Hines—winning both an Emmy Award and an American Choreography Award for outstanding choreography. He starred in the film *Tap Heat* (2004) along with tap elder Arthur Duncan. In 2005 Smith collaborated with Indian kathak guru Pandit Chitresh Das in an exploration of the affinities between tap and kathak.

Appearing with his company A.C.G.I. (Anybody Can Get It) at Jacob's Pillow last summer, Samuels Smith brought a crew of fresh marvels, mostly women, and attracted sold-out audiences. His solos of astonishing speed and power and remarkable ensemble numbers built excitement. Dancers packed his classes at Jacob's Pillow—as they do in workshops around the world.

Thus, it is for being ferociously passionate; for "re-sounding" the rhythmic cadences of the elders; for bringing tap back to the jazz beat; for influencing the next generation of rhythm dancers; for celebrating the power of women in tap; and for investigating the spiritual terrain of the art form that Jason Samuels Smith is deserving of a 2009 Dance Magazine Award. —*Constance Valis Hill*

Allegra Kent

Allegra Kent and Edward Villella in *Bugaku* in 1963

In 1953, when Allegra Kent joined the New York City Ballet, she was 15, it was 5, and I was 22—a Balanchine addict ever since the company was born. From the start there was no overlooking her. Yes, there were only about 50 dancers then, and, yes, City Center was relatively intimate (although not from the second balcony, where people like me perched until we could infiltrate the orchestra at intermission). But Allegra would have stood out in Yankee Stadium. There was no one like her: no one with her unique combination of delicate allure, total resolve, and passionate way of propelling herself through space.

Obviously, Balanchine thought so, too. By 1954 he had created his first role on her: the enigmatic girl in the "Unanswered Question" section of *Ivesiana,* clothed in a stark white leotard, barefoot, her hair floating downward, held aloft by four men, never touching the ground. She was the object of intense desire, yet she was pure innocence: withholding, spellbinding, unaware, yet somehow intensely complicit in the mysteries she represented.

This would be the pattern for most of the great roles Balanchine fashioned or refashioned for her: She embodied all seven of the Brecht-Weill *Seven Deadly Sins* (Lotte Lenya was her vocal alter ego), yet again she was innocent, vibrantly part of the action yet outside it—and again in white. In her most famous role—the Sleepwalker in *La Sonnambula,* endlessly bourréeing across the stage in her floating white nightdress, holding her candle straight before her—she was not only untouchable, she was asleep; both unaware and aware, once again a romantic object that's unobtainable.

When Balanchine created *Bugaku* for her and Edward Villella, the most sexually explicit of all his ballets yet the most rigidly formal, he revealed the tension in her that he understood stemmed from a profound but repressed eroticism. This was the role that prompted Tanaquil Le Clercq to identify her as a "rubber orchid."

She triumphed in most of the great Balanchine roles—Terpsichore, Odette, Sugar Plum; the leads in *Concerto Barocco*, *Agon*, and the second movement of *Symphony in C*. She was ravishing in Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* and hilarious in *The Concert.* She was in the original casts of *Dances at a Gathering, Stars and Stripes, Divertimento No. 15, Episodes, Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet.* Both Balanchine and Robbins happily exploited her amazing range.

Allegra always appeared to be fragile, delicate, but like all ballerinas, she was as strong as steel. Her flexibility was astonishing, her extensions stunning in those pre-Guillem days, her jump huge—it was her jump that first thrilled her two early teachers, Bronislava Nijinska and Carmelita Maracci (both of whom she has written about in these pages). It was her charm and spirit that endeared her to her favorite teacher at the School of American Ballet, Felia Doubrovska. But it was her raw talent, her sheer dance ability, her total commitment to movement that captured Mr. B. No other dancer could have retained his loyalty and love through the erratic, almost perverse, course of her career—leaving the company at 18 to go to college, leaving three more times to bear the three children she was determined to have, eventually choosing to perform only once or twice a season.

In her brilliant autobiography, *Once a Dancer…*, she wrote, "Ballet was the magic and exhilarating force in my life. Natural laws were held in abeyance. The floating laws of clouds and the gyroscopic laws of tops took over, stretching the limits. The body could do wonderful things. Some of these marvels were achieved by technique, but there was something else…." It was that unique "something else" that compelled Balanchine's attention and devotion for 30 years, and that her audience so loved. She was enchanting. Yet with her unearthly beauty, demonic energy, goofy humor, and uncanny aloofness, she also appeared to be enchanted—under a spell, and vulnerable. Even toward the end of her career, watching her in *Scotch Symphony* made me want to rush up onto the stage to protect those fragile wrists. —*Robert Gottlieb*

Ohad Naharin

Leading a session of the Batsheva Ensemble, the second company, 2009

In the center of the studio, Ohad Naharin slowly, smoothly, starts grooving. Waves of energy course through his body, gently sending his joints into rolling curves. As the students around him follow suit, Naharin breaks into a smile and cautions them, "Don't take yourselves too seriously, people." Once a ripple of laughter dies down, he offers his next instruction: "Connect to pleasure."

The 57-year-old Naharin has a knack for connecting people to pleasure, whether they are taking classes in Gaga—his movement language—or drinking in the rich sights and sounds of his choreographic works. The artistic director of Israel's Batsheva Dance Company has always had a passion for movement himself, but it was not until after his compulsory military service that Naharin trained seriously in modern dance. He began his training with Batsheva. He soon became the troupe's newest member and was quickly plucked from the ranks by Martha Graham to dance Esau in her 1974 *Jacob's Dream.*

Fueled by his extraordinary natural aptitude, Naharin's dance career took off. Graham invited him to join her company in New York, where he also studied at the Juilliard School. After performing abroad with Maurice Béjart's company and Israel's Bat-Dor Dance Company, Naharin returned to New York and turned his creative energies towards choreography. In 1980, he started the Ohad Naharin Dance Company, pouring his signature fluidity and dynamic sensitivity into his movement invention. Naharin's blossoming talents as a dancemaker garnered him commissions from companies including Batsheva and the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, and in 1987, Jirí Kylián appointed him as guest choreographer for the Nederlands Dans Theater.

An invitation to lead the Batsheva Dance Company lured Naharin back to his native country in 1990. Steered by his artistic vision and propelled by his choreography, Israel's leading dance troupe embarked on a bold new direction and soared into the top tier of international companies.

Intriguing provocations abound in Naharin's works for Batsheva, from the unconventional seating arrangement for *Mamootot* to the audacious use of accumulations in both *MAX* and "Ehad Mi Yodea," from *Anaphaza*, in which the dancers systematically shed their clothes to the driving chant of a traditional Passover song. Featuring a section in which performers pull audience members onto the stage, *Zachacha* proves that his choreography can be as crowd-pleasing as it is rule-breaking. Yet Naharin's repertory also probes the darker side of the human situation, conjuring up complex emotions with disturbing images.

Regardless of their tone, all of Naharin's works are colored by a seemingly endless palette of vibrantly textured movement, which stretches from razor sharp to silky smooth with everything in between. It is Gaga, with its emphasis on sensation and availability for movement, which enables Batsheva's dancers to bring such captivating qualities to their performances. Not only has Naharin implemented this innovative system in the company's training, but he has opened public classes, which draw dancers and nondancers alike.

During the last two decades, Naharin's pioneering approach and unforgettable choreography injected a catalyzing, invigorating force into Israel's rising dance scene. Meanwhile, the choreographer's influence can be felt abroad, where there is a growing clamor for Gaga classes and an insatiable appetite for his creations. Popular companies, including Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, have performed Naharin's work to rave reviews, and when Batsheva is on tour, it regularly packs the house with enthusiastic audiences. It seems the world has gone gaga for Naharin. *—Deborah Friedes Galili*

Naharin, midair, in his work *Innostress* (1986)

Top: Gadi Dagon, Courtesy Batsheva. Bottom: Lois Greenfield, Courtesy Batsheva

Sara Rudner

Simply put, Sara Rudner is one of the greatest dancers of her generation. Also a choreographer and educator, she has energized the New York dance scene and revitalized the dance program at Sarah Lawrence College.

Rudner began her career as a founding member of Twyla Tharp's first company from 1965 to 1985. Highly physical, with a luscious sense of style, she could make any pedestrian move or casual gesture look as fascinating as a leap or turn. Not that Tharp was doing leaps and turns in the mid-1960s; she was stringing together disparate movements and challenging each dancer to find her own sense of continuity. In her quest for a new kind of coordination, she found a gold mine in Sara Rudner. Sara could create a flow no matter how disjunctive the movements were. The idea of "movement for movement's sake" reached a peak with her. It was not only her blazing clarity and bracing intelligence, but also a kind of wide-awake dreaminess that compelled you to watch her. As Mikhail Baryshnikov said in an interview, "Her eyes, they take you somewhere—very hypnotic." Her spontaneous style, which gave the illusion that she was inventing movement on the spot, was integral to the formation of the Tharp aesthetic.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Rudner studied interpretive dance at a neighborhood music school and later ballet with Bella Malinka, who was on faculty at the High School of Performing Arts. (She did not attend the famous school because, she says, she was afraid of auditioning.) She graduated from Barnard College, where she majored in Russian studies, and danced briefly with Paul Sanasardo before joining Tharp's group.

She created many roles in early Tharp classics including *The Fugue, Eight Jellyrolls, Deuce Coupe, Nine Sinatra Songs, Baker's Dozen,* and *Fait Accompli* (the precursor to *In the Upper Room).* She also appeared in the films *Amadeus, Ragtime,* and *Hair,* all directed by Milos Forman and choreographed by Tharp.

In her own choreography she sought to stretch the conventions of performance. In *Dancing on View* (1975), she had the four dancers going for five hours (I was one of them). On her 33rd birthday, she showed *33 Dances,* a series of 33 solos in a loft that left her visibly exhausted, after which she threw a glass of water over her head. Her small, all-woman group, the Sara Rudner Performance Ensemble, danced in unorthodox venues like the U.S. Customs House and a discotheque in Paris from 1976–1982.

Rudner has also collaborated with Dana Reitz, Wendy Rogers, Douglas Dunn, Patricia Hoffbauer, Jodi Melnick, and Baryshnikov. Her choreography for theater and opera includes working with directors Mark Wing-Davy, Gregory Boyd, and Peter Sellars, and several projects for the Santa Fe Opera. After a 30-year career based in New York, she completed her MFA at Bennington College in 1998, and the following year became the director of dance at Sarah Lawrence College.

As an educator she has opened up the curriculum at Sarah Lawrence, bringing in somatic practices, cross-training, tai chi, and world dance. One of her innovations is that faculty meetings, which are held in the studio, begin with a movement practice—be it Feldenkrais, improvisation, or a breathing technique. Rudner has motivated students by giving them the tools to explore and define themselves as individuals. As she said in "Teacher's Wisdom" (Feb. 2009), "I felt we should be cultivating the dancer as a whole human being."

Recently Rudner has been gathering intergenerational groups of dancers to present her work. At Baryshnikov Art Center in 2007, her large work *Dancing-on-View: Preview/Hindsight,* revealed a powerful sisterhood of movement. It also showed that Rudner has lost none of her energy, eloquence, or charisma. —*Wendy Perron*

Rudner in the 1970s

Top: Colin Fowler. Bottom: Nathaniel Tileson, DM Archives