



REMY CHARLIP

An Appreciation

Remy Charlip stands out as a shining example of warmth and whimsy in our lives. He is a blend of poignancy and humor, honesty and generosity. Through his choreography and performances, his award-winning illustrations for over twenty-six children's books (*"Two octopuses got married and went down the aisle arm-in-arm, arm-in-arm, arm-in-arm"* -- you get the idea), his directing work with experimental theater and the National Theater for the Deaf, his ingenuous choreography, his costumes, he weaves a web of imagination and wonder, inviting the participant to look at things more closely, to allow themselves to be touched and delighted. He exudes childlike innocence. There is a sense of wonder, but also a great sophistication and depth.

I had the pleasure of working with Remy on two different television dance programs. The first was when I was a producer at WGBH, Boston's public television station, and was intent on getting choreographers to create new dances, especially for the camera. Remy had recently finished a concert in New York, and wanted only to adapt the stage works. We compromised. Half the dances were signature pieces like "Glow Worm," his dance based on autobiographical material that incorporated speaking and using sign language in addition to dancing. We borrowed the Giant's Desktop Set from the Children's Museum, where a telephone, ruler, pencil caddy and blotter were magnified to twelve times their actual size. Remy leapt onto the set, an insignificant speck in a grownup world. His costume had rainbow—striped sleeves and a vest that jingled with a motley assortment of gleaming objects you could find in any kid's pocket.

In another dance, he costumed one dancer as the Sun, another as the Moon, and had them toss an inflatable globe of the world back and forth as they did a tap—dance to Chopin. For one of the new works, Remy invited dancer Toby Armour to create transitions in movement among a series of different poses he drew for her. The resulting “Dance In a Bed” was shot with a camera directly overhead, charting her progress across the mattress.

This was actually a form of Remy’s famous Air Mail Dances. One version of their origin has it that Remy was on his way to Queensland, Australia to set one of his works on the company there. He was held captive in quarantine in Borneo because he didn’t have his Yellow Fever certificate and, in desperation, sent pictures to the company of different positions and had them devise the transitions.

But, as I remember it, Remy received a phone call in the middle of the night from a friend in France, asking him to choreograph a dance for her. He agreed, and then promptly fell back to sleep. He forgot about it until he ran into a mutual friend in Holland who reminded him of the imminent concert. Remy panicked and remembered the phone call. He immediately drew some poses on a postcard and air mailed them to the choreographer. “Here’s a start; let me know if you need more,” he said. She did, and the rest is history.

Remy loves to set up situations in which people express themselves and their own creativity. In “The Art of the Dance,” he has an empty canvas on the stage floor, flanked by buckets of red, yellow and blue paint. The choreographer/dancer comes out (when Remy performed here a few years ago he invited his old friend, local choreographer Rudy Perez to be the “artist”), rolls up his or her trousers, and dips a bare foot into one of the buckets. Then he/she proceeds to slip, slide, hop, turn and tap across the canvas. This is repeated with the other colors, and the final creation is held up and auctioned off to the audience, billed as the “first dance you can take home with you.

Remy was also featured on the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)'s "Territory of Art" radio show, produced by curator Julie Lazar, where he issued dance instructions for those listening in a kind of aural Arthur Murray tradition and then gave synopses for "Ten Imaginary Dances."

There is a strong spiritual quality about Remy. The concepts of light and healing are very present in him. He studied and became a teacher of the Alexander Technique (a way of centering and realigning the body's energy and freeing tension). This spirituality is expressed in his works.

One of my favorite books which Remy illustrated is the story of Harlequin, because it reminds me so much of him. In the beginning, Harlequin is playing with his friends, and they are all excitedly discussing their costumes for the night's festive celebration. Harlequin goes home alone sadly, for he does not have a costume. His friends come to his aid, each bringing pieces of theirs. He pins them together, creating the most beautiful costume of all. "Clothed in the love of my friends," he beams.

So you are, Remy. So you will always be.

NANCY MASON HAUSER

