



**THE DANCER FILMS PRESS**

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## The New York Times

### Feiffer's Dancer Returns to Leap Ever So Seriously



Phil Marino for The New York Times  
Jules Feiffer at his home with Lily, his dog.

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO  
Published: July 6, 2011

The ebullient, emotional dancer first came to the public's attention in 1957. Year after year she was moved to express herself: trenchant political criticism, urban anxiety, seasonal highs and lows. You name it, she danced it. Accompanied by sparse words, her lithe, flexible body sprang and collapsed in modern dance poses, creating a choreographed phrase across the newspaper page. And then in 2000, still looking trim in her unitard, she retired.



Courtesy Jean Albano Gallery Chicago  
An image from the "Dance to Spring" cartoon.

Or, rather, her creator, the cartoonist and writer Jules Feiffer, did.



Andrea Weber, foreground, with Judy Dennis and Jules Feiffer. Short films inspired by his work will appear at the River to River festival.

The dancer first sprang into Mr. Feiffer’s weekly comic strip for *The Village Voice* in 1957. Two years later the strip was syndicated; she didn’t stop dancing until Mr. Feiffer, then 71, tired of the weekly deadline. Now she’s back, for a limited engagement. On Saturday the River to River Festival will present the New York premiere of “The Dancer Films,” as part of a larger celebration of artists, like Mr. Feiffer, who particularly capture the energy of New York.

The six extremely short films, each just minutes long and with a script taken directly from Mr. Feiffer’s strips, are directed by Judy Dennis, narrated by Jennifer Dundas and feature original music by Jane Ira Bloom. Andrea Weber, a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, is the dancer, channeling Mr. Feiffer’s beloved character through choreography by Susan Marshall and Larry Keigwin. The films will run through July 17 at the World Financial Center, with an accompanying exhibit of Mr. Feiffer’s drawings up through Aug. 14. There will also be a live event on Sunday, in which Mr. Feiffer will appear and create new dancer drawings while Ms. Weber and Ms. Dundas lead game members of the public in creating their own interpretations of Mr. Feiffer’s dancer. Ms. Bloom will accompany the event with live original music.

Like a lot of New Yorkers his age and younger, Mr. Keigwin, born in 1972, hadn’t even heard of Mr. Feiffer when he was invited to participate in a film project inspired by the character.

“After having this experience, I’m like, ‘How did I not know about this?’ ” Mr. Keigwin said, laughing. “A modern dancer in a comic strip — this is awesome. Just the fact of someone wearing a unitard; I sometimes feel we’re so isolated and alone in that breed of modern dance, I was tickled that there was something mainstream about it.”

His “Dance to Summer” has Ms. Weber striking out in kinetic bursts, seeking escape “from all the inadequate pleasures” of the city. (Each film includes snippets of the dancer in classic New York locations, like the Brooklyn Bridge and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

It seems fitting that Mr. Keigwin and his dance-world colleagues will be helping to re-expose the city of Mr. Feiffer's work. The cartoonist's idea for the character came, after all, from a dancer girlfriend who exposed him to modern dance.

"Outside of providing the early body for the original dancer, who as I said has changed many times as my girlfriends changed, her contribution was dragging me from one dance company to the other and watching these recitals," Mr. Feiffer, who is hard of hearing but still full of one-liners, said over the phone. He laughed, "I was always amused and delighted, to have 18-, 19-, 20-year-old gorgeous young women get up there in unitards and talk about the bleakness and despair of existence, and then dance to it. Because as we all know it can't be art unless it's full of bleakness and despair. Especially in dance." In "A Dance to Art," choreographed by Ms. Marshall, Ms. Weber flies winningly through the air and settles into dramatic poses as Ms. Dundas' excited little girl voice describes, "A dance to what I would do if I weren't me, but somebody else who's really good." Ms. Weber said, "I just really connected to her," adding that she relished this different mode of working — and the long brown wig. "I've been doing Cunningham for so long it's easy to be typecast."

She needn't have worried.

"I just could not believe and held my breath at the good fortune that might emanate from this," Mr. Feiffer said of his first meeting with her, which by chance happened at the Jacob's Pillow Festival in the Berkshires in 2009, where he was attending an opening of a show dedicated to his drawings, and she was performing. (It was, as it turned out, the day Cunningham died.) "And she acted as if I was doing her a favor," he said. "I could not parse that. I was so thrilled by how right she was, and what a remarkable dancer above and beyond everything else that she is."

For Ms. Dennis, who produced the films with Ellen Dennis, her sister and a former producer of the Fall for Dance Festival, Ms. Weber was an obvious choice.

"Her face photographs with expressive qualities quite similar to a cartoon, and she brings the same kind of irrepressible buoyant spirit, expressiveness, that is so captivating about the character," Ms. Dennis said. Beyond that, "we think she's really the most beautiful American modern dancer of our time."

In selecting the choreographers, Ms. Dennis said, she and her sister were drawn to Mr. Keigwin's flair for telling stories, especially funny ones, and for Ms. Marshall's intelligent, psychological approach. These qualities were important, she added, as she saw the films "as short narratives, not as dance films."

Ms. Marshall, a longtime fan of the original drawings, both agreed and disagreed with this assessment.

"That's just who the dancer is," she said. "She is a character, and the films have these words, so they're full of this story. And yet for me the works are more dancerly. They use this very codified vocabulary lots of the time, this shape-based vocabulary I don't associate with content. I associate it with dancers. I enjoyed that twist in the assignment. You have to use this very step-based, shape-based side of dance while somehow expressing the journey of this figure in this cartoon, which is exactly the charm of the dancer."

She paused, and added that what passed for narrative in the dancer's mind was sometimes anything but. "There's one where she's in a tendu, and the line is 'Vietnam,'" she said. "I mean — O.K. Yes! I just love the fact that we'll use tendu for this moment."



## A Dance to Jules Feiffer

### The cartoonist's most famous character comes to new life on screen

By Apollinaire Scherr

Wednesday, Jul 6 2011

When Jules Feiffer was still "a kid, hanging out in the Village," he says, "unemployed and unemployable, without the weekly cartoon in the *Voice*," he met a young woman who would sleep with him. She was a modern dancer.



Stephanie Berger

Andrea Weber does some explaining.

So besides revivals at the Thalia and nights at the White Horse hoping Dylan Thomas would drop by, he joined his girlfriend in churches and basements for dance concerts. "These were young bohemians in their first recitals," Feiffer, now 82, recalls. "The dancers would feel compelled to explain what you were about to see. What was amusing to me was the contradiction between the way they danced, which was full of exuberance because they were young, and the message they were conveying, which was that we are all about to die."

When the *Voice* hired him a few years later, in 1956, he included a Dancer character among his inky clan of neurotic explainers. Clad in the period uniform of black footless tights and black leotard, she leapt from one improbable position to another while intoning an ode to summer ("In this dance I symbolize the desire to escape ... from all the inadequate pleasures") or the end of summer ("The solstice in its declension ... and insect repellent, gathered in an organic unity") or revolution in the streets.



Over the decades, she grew more political and less buxom (at first her boobs had a choreographic mind of their own), but she never made it onto celluloid—trans-formed like Superman into a live action figure! Until now.

This Saturday, July 9, Judy Dennis's shorts *To Spring, To Art, To the Loss of Innocence*, and to other milestones premiere at the World Financial Center as part of the River to River Festival. The six two-minute films—each playing on its own screen in a continuous loop from 11 a.m. until 7 p.m. for nine days—are meant to be stumbled upon the way you would a strip in the newspaper: serendipitously.

Before an edgeless, sky-colored backdrop that reflects the nowhere and anywhere of the blank page Feiffer set his characters against, the dances imagine the steps between the cartoon cells without flattening the Dancer's trademark ups and downs of fortune and mood. To conjure the homemade feel of Feiffer's lines, the camera resists any flashy maneuvers. We see the Dancer (the statuesque and radiant Andrea Weber) from head to toe as she lunges, twirls, and deflates to her own quizzical thoughts (voiced by actress Jennifer Dundas) or to jazz composer Jane Ira Bloom's pleasingly casual riffs.

Feiffer is so moved by the films, which he gave his blessing to but did not meddle in, that he "can't even talk about it," he says—and doesn't for several seconds. Eventually he explains, "They translated my cartoon dancer into both cartoon and something very poetic and very real, with its own sweetness and innocence." But they kept his wit.

Anyone who has ever wondered if modern dance would be better off with supertitles will giggle over a dancer who backs up her every random and extravagant move with a whole paragraph of exposition. And anyone else—who knows how little dance and talk have in common—will appreciate the goofy aplomb with which the Dancer exposes the art form's naïve hopes and pretensions.

Susan Marshall, one of the films' two choreographers, encountered Feiffer's Dancer upon moving to New York in the early '80s and "loved her, I always loved her," she says. "She captures this great desire to *express* that young dancers especially have. And what shape that takes is almost irrelevant because the dance means what she wants it to mean because she feels it so deeply." The choreographer laughs. "Dance is not the medium for abstract thought, and the fact that she feels she can express this stuff is deeply charming. That's the comedy."

No one left interpretative dance farther behind than Merce Cunningham, and yet Weber, an eight-year veteran of the Cunningham troupe, identifies completely with Feiffer's creation. "It's so funny how often I think about steps as I traipse around New York" working out her feelings and adversity to the world. "Feiffer really got that about a dancer's spirit."

Larry Keigwin, who choreographed two of the films as well as the upcoming revival of *Rent*, recognizes himself in the Dancer, too. "She's so funny. There's a sheer joy that can be really funny. She gets so passionate about her story that it overcomes her and she has to dance."

And what would she have to dance about today, I ask Feiffer. His answer comes quick: "The loss of America." We have become "a series of tribes living under the same roof." Still, she would be dancing: "Implicit in her very existence is a desperate clinging to hope," he says. "However much she is smashed to the ground, she rises and dances all over again."

## THE HUFFINGTON POST

### Audiences Find Their Inner Dancer at Downtown Jules Feiffer Exhibition

July 11, 2011 | By Della Hasselle, DNAinfo Editorial Assistant



LOWER MANHATTAN —Cartoonist Jules Feiffer's famous dancer came to life at a "Dance In" for the River to River Festival's "Express Your Inner Feiffer Dancer" exhibit. The character, which was created for the artist's weekly Village Voice comic strip in 1957 and quickly became a New York icon, inspired onlookers as young as three to pirouet, sashay and jump Sunday under the instruction of Merce Cunningham Dance Company performer Andrea Weber.

The event was part of a festival exhibit which celebrates Feiffer's work, and which features six short films.

"I liked it because it was fun, and you got to move your body a lot," five-year-old dancer and TriBeCa resident Fiona Bell said about the event.



"A Dance to Spring," one of Jules Feiffer's famous dancer cartoons, was displayed in the World Financial Center for the 2011 River to River Festival. (Jules Feiffer)

Presented by the Arts World Financial Center, the Jules Feiffer drawing exhibition is the first of a summer series of the River to River Festival's "Extraordinary Moves," a program that celebrates dance through film, art and movement with various performances by Weber, contemporary company STREB and other performers.

Sunday's program was part of an exhibit which displayed "The Dancer Films," directed by Judy Dennis, and an exhibit of original cartoon strips, watercolors and iris prints by the Pulitzer-Prize-winning cartoonist.



"A Dance to Autumn" was created by Jules Feiffer in 1997. (Jules Feiffer)

The contemporary-style movement was taught in sections, based on Feiffer's series of black-and-white sketches of a single female dancer onstage.

"I thought it was lovely," Long Island resident Corinne Berger, 39, said after the show. "Dance is fabulous and it's wonderful to see a group of people move their bodies like that."

While the younger audience members were enthralled by the impromptu dance class, older viewers were excited by the opportunity to watch Feiffer in person as he sketched cartoons of the dancer character that appeared for 40 years in the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*.

"It was amazing to see him," TriBeCa resident Victoria Weil, 41, said about the iconic New Yorker, who also illustrated childrens' books, adding that the show inspired her to introduce her children to Feiffer's work, such as the book *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

"The character is fundamentally someone who finds it imperative to find the world through dance, and responds to New York with acute sensitivity," said Dennis.

"It's psychological, burning with intelligence," she added. "Only a curmudgeon wouldn't be delighted."



# THIRTEEN

SundayArts News 7/3/2011

<http://vimeo.com/28957891>

## Dance at River to River Festival

Downtown, at the World Financial Center, the River to River Festival presents “Extraordinary Moves,” a celebration of dance through film, art and movement. The festival is anchored by “The Dancer Films” — a series of short films produced by Ellen and Judy Dennis. The dances are choreographed by Susan Marshall and Larry Keigwin and are inspired by the whimsical cartoons of Jules Feiffer. The films, directed by Judy Dennis, feature Big Apple landmarks like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Bridge in a celebration of dance and the city. A selection of Feiffer’s cartoons, which ran for 40 years in the Village Voice, will also be on view at the Courtyard Gallery of the World Financial Center. Feiffer himself will create new dancer drawings at a “dance-in” on July 10th.

## NEW YORK SUMMER GUIDE **R&R Is Not an Option**

### Plotting a season’s worth of kid diversions, every weekend through

**Labor Day.** Cartoonist Jules Feiffer’s “Dancer” drawings come to life Saturday morning at the World Financial Center’s Winter Garden (Hudson River Greenway nr. Vesey St.), where director Judy Dennis premieres six vignettes from “The Dancer Films” (11 a.m. to 7 p.m.).

NYDailyNews.com

**DAILY NEWS SEASONS OF LOVE.** Judy Dennis translates seasonal, emotional and political milestones in her collection of short films inspired by a cartoon character in “The Dancer Films,” about a performer who brings the cartoon to life through dance. 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Free. World Financial Center Winter Garden, 200 Liberty St. (212) 219-9401.

**PLAYBILL.COM**

GO→ Lower Manhattan has become a happening place over the past couple of summers in no small part to the ever-growing *River to River Festival*. This Wednesday, the fest will screen “Desperately Seeking Susan,” the quintessential ’80s movie starring Madonna and Rosanna Arquette. The film part of the fest continues throughout the summer with screenings of *The Godfather Part II*, Judy Dennis’ *The Dancer Films* and *The Brother From Another Planet*. Theatre, dance and music happenings are also a big part of the fest, including an outdoor production of *Henry V* that recreates King Henry’s journey from “England” (or, in this case, Battery Park) across the “English Channel” (New York Harbor) by “boat” (cruise ship) to “France” (Governors Island) to recreate the Battle of Agincourt.

*WHITEWALL MAGAZINE***“The Dancer Films” at the River to River Festival**

By Elizabeth Barker | July 18, 2011



This summer, New York’s River to River Festival is hosting a two-part tribute to Jules Feiffer as part of their Extraordinary Moves dance exposition. This exhibition includes “A Dance to Spring: The Drawings of Jules Feiffer” which examines a range of work over Feiffer’s 65 year career, including *The Dancer*, one of his most beloved creations. *The Dancer* first appeared in Feiffer’s *Village Voice* strip in 1957 and only retired from syndication in 1997. Over the years, *The Dancer* has not only examined socio-political issues, but the challenges and joys of being human, as expressed in her undying commitment to movement.

This year, *The Dancer* finds new life through a series of short films directed and produced by filmmaking team Judy and Ellen Dennis. In these six short films, the Dennis sisters derive scripts directly from Feiffer’s strips while his drawings served as the basis for the choreography. Performed by Andrea Weber and Jennifer Dundas, as *The Dancer* and *The Voice of the Dancer*, respectively, the pair introduce the beloved piece to a new generation.

*Whitewall* spoke to Judy Dennis about how this project evolved.

WHITEWALL: *What was the impetus behind bringing life to Jules Feiffer’s dancer?*

JUDY DENNIS: I was working on a screen adaptation of a story by Doris Lessing. After a reading with Angela Lansbury, and before I could get the film airborne – it’s an ambitious project – I thought about a project within reach. I imagined creating a series of very short narrative films and....lightbulb.

WW: *What was your goal in revisiting The Dancer in this way?*

JD: *The Dancer* has been pretty much off the scene since Jules retired from *The Village Voice* in 1997. She’s a perfect character to re-employ: cool men, bad weather and past Presidents often foil *The Dancer*’s efforts to freely express herself, but she springs back, in full creative bloom, to navigate the complicated and wonderful world in which we all reside.

WW: *What was your first encounter with Feiffer’s work?*

JD: In high school, I directed a production of “Feiffer’s People,” a theater medley of Jules’s strips. That’s when I first met *The Dancer*. Before that, we grew up with *The Phantom Tollbooth*. It’s author, Norton Juster, was my dad’s roommate in the Jewish frat at University of Pennsylvania.

WW: *How do you feel The Dancer Films differ from the illustrated version?*

JD: *The Dancer Films* are structured with two parts. Each film contains a dance and text (springing from a cartoon) and a coda. In the codas, we follow the Dancer through iconic New York locations, each linked thematically to its dance: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, American Museum of Natural History, across The Brooklyn Bridge, and up to the romantic heart of Central Park, Bow Bridge. The films, of course, pulse with the spirit of our live Dancer: Andrea Weber and the voice Jennifer Dundas.

WW: *How involved was Mr. Feiffer in the project?*

JD: Jules said, Go Ahead! the day I approached him with my ideas. He dropped in twice during our artist residency at Baryshnikov Arts Center to take a quick look at the choreography we were creating, and was delighted. We saw him again once the films were entirely finished.

WW: *How do you feel that film successfully captures dance? Are there ways in which you feel it is unsuccessful?*

JD: Totally successful, thanks principally to rich collaborative work from choreographer Susan Marshall, choreographer Larry Keigwin, beautiful and inventive Andrea Weber, Neil Patel, our designer, and cinematographer Dyanna Taylor. We used Jules’s cartoons as choreographic blueprints, and his aesthetic – mine, too – is unadorned. The dances are narrative and have their own movement-based values, too. The idea, visually, was to create a sense of the rapturous place she goes to when she dances; and to keep the audience’s experience of the Dancer as unobstructed – free – as possible. The voice of Jennie Dundas and Jane Ira Bloom’s music, composed with great feeling for the dance, and perfectly orchestrated with a cool 60s beat, complete the synthesis.



# Western Ways

Western Arts Alliance

Newsletter Volume 31, July 2011

14 Western Ways



Judy Dennis

*" [Jules Feiffer's modern Dancer] doesn't age, and though cool men, the weather and past presidents often foil her efforts to freely express herself, she returns cartoon strip after strip – and now film after film – to dance again."*

## Notes From *The Dancer Films* & New York's River to River Festival

The Quintessential New Yorker Begins Her Journey West

By Judy Dennis



Andrea Weber of Merce Cunningham Dance Company as legendary cartoonist Jules Feiffer's modern Dancer

June 29, 2011 – In less than a week, [The Dancer Films](#) will premiere at World Financial Center Winter Garden as the centerpiece of Extraordinary Moves, Arts World Financial Center's part in this summer's River to River Festival in Lower Manhattan. In the fall, *The Dancer Films* will arrive onscreen at the Mondavi Center in California.

*The Dancer Films* is a collection of very short films I've created based on legendary cartoonist Jules Feiffer's modern Dancer, with beautiful Andrea Weber of Merce Cunningham Dance Company as the Dancer and actress Jennifer Dundas as her voice.

Feiffer's classic cartoon character appeared for four decades in a variety of publications, including *The Village Voice*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Observer* in London. She is an icon of earnestness and optimism. She dances to celebrate a cycle of milestones: seasonal, emotional and political. The Dancer has been pretty much off the scene since Feiffer retired from

*The Village Voice* in 1997; there are generations nostalgic for her and generations yet to be captivated by her – and by Feiffer's bracing point of view.

During an artists' residency at New York's Baryshnikov Arts Center 18 months ago, my twin sister and producer Ellen Dennis and I worked with Andrea and choreographers Susan Marshall and Larry Keigwin to create the dance halves of each of 6 two-minute films, using Feiffer's cartoons as blueprints. Jane Ira Bloom, jazz sax luminary, composed theme music for the films – flute, bass, congas, vibes – with a perfect cool '60's beat. Within two weeks, Feiffer's drawings alchemized into dance for film.

Last summer, we filmed the dances in the concert hall at SUNY Purchase, and followed our Dancer through iconic locations around New York, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, American Museum of Natural

History, across The Brooklyn Bridge and up to the romantic heart of Central Park, Bow Bridge.

The Dancer is a modern dancer seeking an artistic life in New York, and she's got the city running through her nervous system. She doesn't age, and though cool men, the weather and past presidents often foil her efforts to freely express herself, she returns cartoon strip after strip – and now film after film – to dance again.

### Why Come West?

After a preview at The Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College, and a New York premiere, the films will arrive at the Mondavi Center – first among arts presenters to hear our ideas for *The Dancer Films*, see the finished films, and propose introducing the films to its audiences. We expect to feel, in crossing the country this fall, a kind of homecoming. The films are short effervescences, and at the source of that effervescence is the collaborative spirit of our remarkable artists, all with

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*Notes from The Dancer Films continued from page 14*

international and trans-continental lives, and with creative roots in the West.

Andrea Weber is a lead dancer with Merce Cunningham, whose performing history in the West runs deep. Dyanna Taylor, Director of Photography (and granddaughter of Dorothea Lange), began in film in San Francisco and is now based in New Mexico. The work of all our key collaborators - choreographers, composer, designer, actress, flying director - has been featured on major stages and screens throughout the West. My own early professional experiences ran from MGM soundstages to Mark Taper Forum and two ACTs (in Seattle and San Francisco), through the Canyonlands, and back to Oregon Contemporary Theater.

More recently, my sister Ellen produced Orange County Performing Arts Center's (now Segerstrom Center for the Arts) two innovative seasons of Fall for Dance. Our personal experiences of the West date back to our transformative '70's: Ellen's time as a student at Reed College, and my summiting Mount St. Helens the year I was first introduced to Jules Feiffer's modern Dancer and decided to direct her in a production of *Feiffer's People*, a theater medley of his strips.

*The Dancer Films* are timely and timeless; we feel they'll hit the hearts and funny bones of everyone who sees them. We respond to the Dancer's acute sensitivity, and enjoy what we find at her roots: an irrepressible desire to express herself as she navigates the

complicated and wonderful world in which we all reside.

~

*Judy Dennis created The Dancer Films after decades of adventures in the mainstream of American theater, film and television. As a director and casting director, she has worked with preeminent artists of her time, ranging from Alan J. Pakula and Terrence Mallick to Harold Pinter. Her work as a director has appeared on HBO, at New York's Museum of Modern Art and at film festivals worldwide.*



A Dance to Spring title card (the classic.)



THE DANCER FILMS Trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrSpmh8dzl8>

**THIRTEEN**  SUNDAYARTS NEWS Video

<http://vimeo.com/28957891>