

Arts & Leisure

Section 2

DANCE

Welcome Back to the Hotel California



Photographs by Stefano Paltera for the New York Times

Daniela Geshundheit of the Collage Dance Theater on a fire escape of the shuttered Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles during the performance "Sleeping With the Ambassador."

LOS ANGELES
THE hotel was closed, but a handful of stragglers were trudging up the expansive front driveway to the Ambassador at sundown.

It's a long walk from Wilshire Boulevard. The canyon of surrounding office buildings abruptly ends, and there it is — the place once known as "Hollywood's hotel." The movie stars are gone, but the building still sits here, an H-shaped, 444-room castle of Italian Renaissance and Mission revival styles, circa 1921. Its 24 acres of valuable land roll on and on.

The Ambassador was shuttered 14 years ago, so what you noticed during that uphill stroll were the effects of 14 years of neglect: huge rifts in the concrete, shrubs gone wild, missing plaster that revealed bricks underneath and a thriving community of feral cats. There were security guards to keep out the curious. (I knew a woman who boasted

Dancers now haunt the Ambassador, where Barrymores lived and Robert Kennedy died.

of having evaded them to have sex in an abandoned ballroom.)

We rounded the last corner and were at our destination, the swimming pool. It was opening night, and the show would start soon. We had walked into a manufactured time warp. Guests milled about the edge, drinking champagne from plastic cups, paying no mind that the pool was without water and the cabanas across the way were wrecked. A few revelers smiled and pointed at the blue plastic swim mats stranded on the cracked bottom.

Two musicians played for us from the bottom of the pool, under a big "9 feet" marker where the concrete leveled off. A woman in silver lamé and 1940's hairdo sang "Taking a Chance on Love."

This was the overture to "Sleeping With the Ambassador," the new performance piece by the Los Angeles-based Collage Dance Theater. The group is known for making dance-theater pieces at cultural sites throughout the city. There is a bit of "Hey, let's put on a show" informality about the group's work. Its philosophy, according to a news release, is that "art is not a 'high-brow' affair."

The public has not been allowed into the Ambassador since closing day, Jan. 3, 1989;

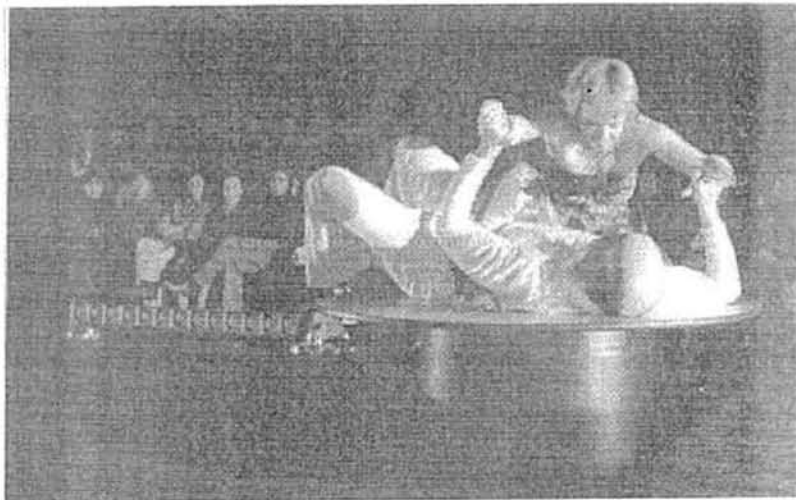
Laura Bleiberg is the dance critic of The Orange County Register.

this show continues on weekends through June 15. It is a singular opportunity — a chance to make one last pilgrimage to a landmark before it is, or might be, bulldozed. Officials with the Los Angeles Unified School District, which bought the site in 2001, will decide in coming months whether to convert the buildings into schools or demolish them and construct new ones.

"Sleeping With the Ambassador" is not a tour, Heidi Duckler, the company's artistic director, said pointedly. It's a theatrical performance. She intends it to be an evocation of the history that happened here. The name dropping could go on for days. The Barrymores and the Fitzgeralds living in the bungalows, Buster Crabbe swimming laps, Vivien Leigh accepting the Oscar for "Gone With the Wind" and Sammy Davis Jr. entertaining in the Cocoanut Grove. And the most notorious moment of all, when Robert F. Kennedy was mortally wounded in the pantry just off the Embassy Ballroom 35 years ago next month.

But right now, the 150 ticket-holders were back in the twilight zone, applauding an introductory duet of abstract movement by two dancers, a sentimental couple we would see throughout the evening. We followed them to the entrance of the below-ground casino shops. Directly above that doorway, Daniela Geshundheit (her real name) stood on a fire escape and sang an eerie song.

"Ooohhh, it's Cinderella and Rapunzel altogether there," cooed one woman, pointing at Ms. Geshundheit, whose white wavy



Mona Jean Cedar and Alan Grant in the hotel's Cocoanut Grove club.

hair and thrift-store ball gown seem to glow.

A man observed, "It's like a scene from 'West Side Story.'"

"You know, it's just a dream," Ms. Geshundheit warbled. "It's the same..."

A photograph of the Ambassador in its heyday was projected on the awning below Ms. Geshundheit. The hotel gleamed like a chateau with flowers blooming in Technicolor.

We descended a few steps into the dark hallway. In this warren of once-chic shops

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we were voyeurs, inching along past picture windows made into ghostly dioramas. Three guys tap danced in the barber shop. Disembodied ladies' arms poked out through black holes, modeling rings and bracelets in the jewelry store display. In another window, a brown-paper mummy lay in a mound of popcorn packing material.

Red-white-and-blue bunting surrounded one door frame. A man dressed as a Secret Service agent stood nearby. This is the show's only nod to the Kennedy assassination, which occurred in a part of the hotel that is off limits.

A female dancer in red workout clothes was trapped in a window display. She pressed against the enclosure, staring at us like a caged animal, making us uncomfortable.

"What is this about?" a well-dressed woman asked a friend, a

The dancers, in pajamas for the big finish, cavort over the lobby couches.

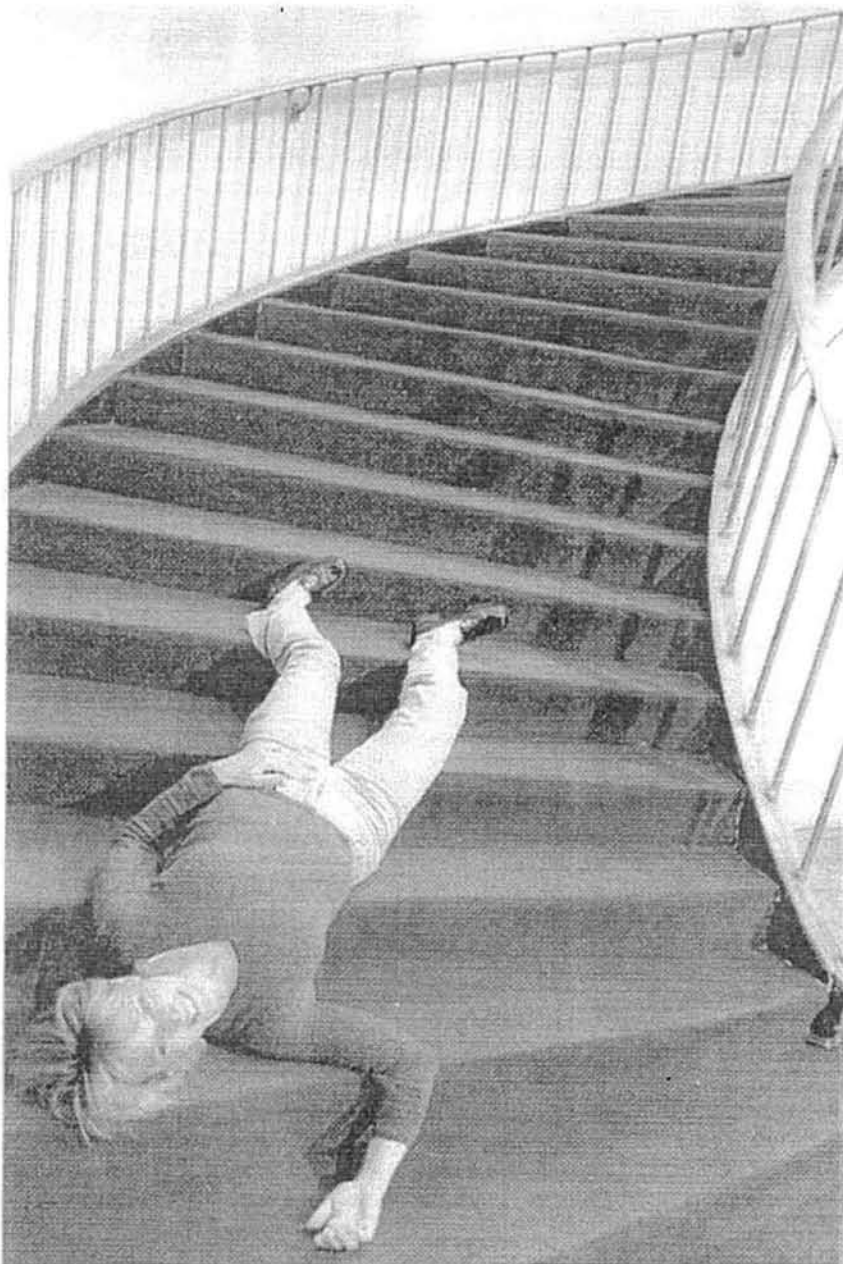
man in the know.

"It's art," he said, without irony. "It has to do with abandonment."

Ms. Duckler and the ushers hurried us on, past the man sprawled upside down on the grand stairway reaching for a fallen bouquet and into the deep-green-and-white coffee shop, designed in the 1950's by Paul R. Williams. Then I knew where I was. I was in this room on the hotel's last day, a reporter covering the hotel's final hours for The Los Angeles Herald Examiner. (Ten months later, the Hearst Corporation closed down the newspaper.)

On the Ambassador's last day, reporters and photographers hung out interviewing guests and staff in the shop. We ate the last hamburgers. We chased after Margaret Burk, the Ambassador public relation's spokeswoman, as she grabbed a bouquet of flowers from a man who had come to leave it in memory of Kennedy.

Later on opening night, the Collage company prepared us for a phony movie audition in the neighboring Celebrity Bar. After two more stops, we arrived at the stage of the Coconut Grove, where we watched the dancers run and romp through the



Stefano Paltera for The New York Times

Heidi Duckler, the artistic director of the Collage Dance Theater, posing on a staircase at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Grove's tiered seating area.

The dance concluded in the oversized lobby, with its rows of rectangular white columns that went on so long it was like looking at infinity. The dancers came out in pajamas and — after wild cavorting over the couches — they collapsed at our feet. Big applause.

Everyone gathered at an outside patio to eat, drink and talk. There was Marjorie Fasman, 86, daughter of the movie producer Sol Lesser (the "Tarzan" movies), who grew up eight blocks from the hotel. She recalled there were high jinks aplenty. She saw Buster Keaton fall into a wedding cake and Jean Harlow dancing in a satin dress with nothing on

underneath. The movie theater impresario Sid Grauman faked his own murder by hiding in his room for five days and lying on the floor covered in ketchup when his friends broke down the door to his room.

And how did Ms. Fasman like the dance?

"It was amazing," she said, speaking of both the show and the hotel. "It was an institution. I think to tear it down would be a disaster."

But in this town, the public's eye is usually focused on what's newest, brightest, shiniest. These days, that would be Frank Gehry's silvery, swooping Walt Disney Concert Hall, about three miles away. This grand old dame barely registers. □