

# Words can dance

The choreography in Richard Daniels' mobile app embodies Sondheim's music and lyrics

REVIEW BY SUSAN REITER

For the fourth volume of his *Dances for an iPhone* app series, choreographer/videographer Richard Daniels has created a suite of seven delicate, contemplative dance miniatures set to selections by Stephen Sondheim. These four solos and three duets capture their dancers — most of them mature, deeply expressive performers — with an intimacy and directness that strips away any veneer of performance mannerisms.

Daniels' ongoing series of dances, intended to be viewed in the palm of one's hand, developed from elements that captivated him in the videos he regularly shot as he rehearsed his choreography. "I kept seeing something in that rehearsal footage that I really loved and hoped to eventually explore," he explained via email in November 2014. The first volume, which became available in 2010, offered six dances, ranging from two to five minutes in duration, set to material by an eclectic mix of composers. The second installment (2011) also explored diverse composers, while the third (2012) focused on the music of Alexander Scriabin.

Daniels had made one earlier piece to a Sondheim song, which led to the 2014 volume, "Dancing Sondheim." "Sondheim's work is so nuanced with regard to the human experience and human emotion, I feel like this all meshes well with what I want to create," he said. He avoided original cast recordings or renditions by more familiar vocalists. His selections tend toward more contemplative, introspective interpretations, and his choreography allows the dancers to come across with unaffected spontaneity.

The simple studio settings (three different, well-known New York City rehearsal spaces) are astutely chosen and exquisitely employed. The gleaming sunlight creating patterns on a pale wooden floor or the urban scenery beyond large windows subtly enhances the theatricality. For Janis Brenner's restlessly uneasy solo to Cleo Laine's interpretation of "No One Is Alone," a corner of the brick-walled studio becomes Brenner's place of retreat, a seeming reaffirmation of solitude, while her advances toward the expansive window communicate her wish to connect, to confirm the message of the song's title.

Veteran dancers whose life experience imbues their understated movements with an effortless gravitas perform the other two female solos. Particularly stunning is Carmen de Lavallade's poignant dance to "Children and Art" (sung hauntingly by Maria Friedman). This magnificent performer, now past 80, has long been an acclaimed actor as well as dancer, and her every move and glance evoke a range of emotions and

ideas. She comes across as both majestic and deeply vulnerable. Hers is the one solo Daniels set in a windowless space, and the white wall behind her conjures up the "blank page or canvas" that provides the impetus for *Sunday in the Park with George*. (Incidentally, de Lavallade's connection to Sondheim's work goes back to 1974's *The Frogs*; she was the choreographer for its initial production at Yale University.)

In the most unusual solo, we hear no music. Deborah Jowitt — a venerable leading dance critic as well as performer and choreographer — speaks the lyrics of "Every Day a Little Death," as her gestures and movements convey palpable tension, fury, spite and resignation. In the lone male solo, Robert La Fosse dances with restrained eloquence to a melancholy recording of "Finishing the Hat" (Patrick Mason's vocal accompanied by David Starobin's guitar). Here Daniels' choreography glancingly references the lyrics, as La Fosse's casual yet precise movements suggest a man confronting his options — questioning and evaluating his choices.

"Moon in My Window" (unrelated to the number from *Do I Hear a Waltz?*), set to an instrumental "Johanna," is a fluid duet for Rebecca Rigert and Brian McGinnis, marked by swooping lifts and unforced close-ups. In "Children and Art" (sung by Macy Robinson), Risa Steinberg and Megan Williams give a deeply expressive yet wonderfully restrained performance — one that suggests dialogue and occasional role-playing where each becomes a child. Daniels switches the location mid-dance, and mixes in brief, charming footage of 5-year-old dancer Ziva Etta Salan.

Another duet for two women, "Pacific Passages," set to an instrumental rendition of "Pretty Lady," is choreographed by Christopher Caines — the first choreographer Daniels has invited to participate in the series. Caines, whose movement style is marked by sharp, precise footwork and leg positions, creates an intriguing exploration of partnering and intimacy for Jodie and Melissa Toogood — two sisters who are lovely yet contrasting performers.

The instrumentals, such as the one Caines has chosen, lend themselves particularly well to this delicate, understated dance form that Daniels has pioneered. In other cases, the intensity and layered richness of Sondheim's lyrics at times threaten to overwhelm the movement — although a master such as de Lavallade subtly translates his ideas into physical expression. Taken together, these seven new *Dances for an iPhone* offer an intriguing and different exploration of Sondheim's profound imagination. [TSR]

