

Critics single out the best in the Bay Area

By Joshua Kosman
December 9, 2016



For a relatively small and underpopulated region situated out here on the edge of the continent, San Francisco and the Bay Area have exerted an outsize influence on the cultural life of the United States. Out of the area's galleries and concert halls, theaters and recording studios, bookstores and ateliers has come a huge flow of creative energy that has forever transformed the landscape.

Filmmakers take the geography of San Francisco as an inspiration. The ebb and flow of musical innovation — in rock 'n' roll, jazz, classical and everything in between — continues to shape-shift across the decades. Actors and painters, dancers and playwrights keep finding new ways of approaching the old artistic forms. It's an achievement that is easier to admire than to calibrate.

But that doesn't mean we can't try.

For this special package, the cultural critics and writers of The Chronicle took a carefully considered look at their respective fields and picked out the very best that the Bay Area has had to offer.

The range was wide open, encompassing everything from more than a century ago to the present day.

And then — because choosing just one artist, work or trend out of the entire history of an art form would have been ridiculously restrictive — we fleshed out our offerings with some runners-up and honorable mentions.

Critics' Choice Dance: the Christensen brothers

By Allan Ulrich
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The Christensen brothers

Collectively, Willam, Lew and Harold Christensen, all hardy sons of Utah and erstwhile vaudevillians, gave San Francisco its enduring classical dance culture. They did not found the

San Francisco Ballet, but their association with the company — as directors, choreographers, dancers and teachers — spread over almost five decades.

Thanks to Willam, the San Francisco Ballet established its independence from the Opera by the mid-1940s. Willam gave the company its first full-length ballet, “Coppélia,” in 1939; created the first full-length “Swan Lake” in the United States in 1940; and, to the continuing delight of children of all ages and dance- company accountants everywhere, gave America its first “Nutcracker.”

Harold Christensen directed the San Francisco Ballet School for 30 years, elevating it to one of the finest dance academies in the country.

Lew Christensen was America’s first great male classical dancer and, from filmed evidence, a true *danseur noble*. He matured at George Balanchine’s New York companies, guested here first in 1949 and then succeeded Willam as artistic director in 1952. With former company dancer Michael Smuin as associate, Lew remained on the job until his death in 1984. His artistic credo owed much to Balanchine in its musicality and purity of gesture.

When the San Francisco Ballet sought Christensen’s successor, they found in Helgi Tomasson a great dancer whose aesthetic values rivaled his predecessor’s. The link to the early years of the San Francisco Ballet is clear. When you attend the “Nutcracker” that will open the company’s 84th season, give a thought to those pioneering siblings from Utah.

Runners-up

Isadora Duncan: Although she was born in San Francisco and grew up in Oakland, Duncan, above, made her most significant contribution to dance in Europe and New York. Nevertheless, in this community, modern dancers celebrate Duncan as a native daughter. She freed dance from constrictions, whether they were ballet rules or whalebone corsets. The ancient Greeks inspired her; her heady emotional life propelled her into dance history,

“New Sleep” (San Francisco Ballet; 1987): If there is one ballet that has defined Helgi Tomasson’s 32-year tenure at the San Francisco Ballet, it was William Forsythe’s wild ride of a fantasy that had something to do with teachers and everything to do with contemporary classicism.

Honorable mention

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival: For almost 40 years, this annual celebration has introduced us to the incredible diversity of dance cultures in the Bay Area. Every year brings surprises.

Dance for a Reason: This annual benefit testifies to the generosity of the local dance community.

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