



BY RACHEL HOWARD

Photographs by Andy Mogg

**CHOREOGRAPHER NANCY KARP
FOLLOWS THE
BAND TO NEW WORK**



**MOVED
BY
THE**

MUSIC



Witnesses may have mistaken the scene for Italy. Choreographer Nancy Karp sent San Francisco's Green Street Mortuary Brass Band striding across downtown Mission Street as members of Nancy Karp + Dancers threaded through the musicians' ranks. It was a bright and sunny day in August 2002. The music consisted of old hymns. The dancers' movements were simple, punctuated by long moments of stillness. It was in a way hauntingly sad—melancholy, yes, that's it—but mostly mysterious.

The southern Italian geographic inspiration proved even more enigmatic a month later, when Karp restaged the work *La Processione* some thirty miles away in the less expansive confines of an Emeryville, California, art gallery. The band marched to the front of the room in a high-volume, yet curious, spectacle. But to Karp the dance, which she now considers a study for the second piece in a projected trilogy, speaks of pure Sicily. And if the connections aren't obvious to everyone, that's just as this veteran abstract dancemaker would have it.

It all started when Karp heard this sweet, sad sound. "I was sitting in North Beach [San Francisco's 'Little Italy'] one afternoon," she says, "and you can't be in North Beach long without coming across the Green Street Band." Though the fabled San Francisco marching ensemble plays mostly Chinese funerals, its doleful brass melodies still captured the spirit of the Easter-time processions that had so moved Karp during a

LA PROCESSIONE

An art gallery set the stage for Nancy Karp + Dancers and the Green Street Mortuary Brass Band—an Italian-at-heart band that plays mostly Chinese funerals—in *La Processione*.

recent spring in Sicily, where she spends two to four months every year. Soon she became a self-professed "Green Street groupie," heading to North Beach on Sundays hoping that the band would pass by, leading another funeral.

Karp had already completed *Il Mercato*, her first dance inspired by that location, when the opportunity came to create a site-specific work for San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens, and she decided to continue experimenting with the Sicily theme.

Well practiced in the larger-than-life theatrics of outdoor performance (one memorable Karp work, *surface roll*, sent dancers looping around the inside of an empty swimming pool in the rain), the choreographer called on the Green Street group for her open-air soundscape. "The band played beautifully," Karp remembered, so much so that she planned to use the band in a new proscenium-stage work inspired by the region, the second in her trilogy. But when the time came to begin choreographing in earnest, the Green Street Mortuary Brass Band had to go. Composer Alvin Curran, a longtime

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Karp collaborator, suggested that the brass instrumentation was too bombastic for the new dance's delicate, nostalgic movement.

The second of the three creations, *La Traversa*, premiered in May 2003 in San Francisco, using five dancers and a score for violin, trombone, accordion, and authentic sounds of southern Italy. Curran, who lives in Italy six months each year, proved the ideal man for devising the new music. "He's simpatico with the culture and has a whole library of recorded sounds from that area," Karp said.

Karp's Italian choreography itself is completely nonliteral. From haphazard parking patterns to narrow cobblestone streets and brash market hawkers, Karp has channeled her impressions of that environment into enigmatic gestures and suggestive stage formations. "The piece is really about what goes on in the streets and the breaking of rules," Karp said. "The Sicilians have their own rules to live by that are very different from urban life in San Francisco. Crossing the street there is a big feat." She took the anarchy of rural Italian life as a cue to transgress formal rules of dance-building.

Only one segment of the site-specific *La Processione* remains in *La Traversa*, a unison section Karp probably wouldn't have created had she not been working outdoors. "*La Processione* allowed me to pare things down, because I needed someone across the street to see the pattern and the gesture. There's a forgiveness about being outside because there's so much to look at."

Karp is already cooking up a future collaboration—the third piece in her Sicily trilogy—with the Green Street musicians, who, she hastens to note, play much more beautifully than the ragtag Sicilian bands that first inspired her. "In Sicily, they play off-key and they're out of step," she said. But, she adds, anarchy can have a certain charm. "They probably only practice the day before Easter, but they're fantastic!" ■

Rachel Howard was until recently dance critic of the San Francisco Examiner. She is currently finishing a memoir that is to be published by Dutton in fall 2004.