

Pub. date: July 4, 2012  
Source: New Jersey Newsroom  
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## **A new American Dance Machine gears up for the 21st century**

Celebrated dance sequences from three notable Broadway musicals — plus an MGM gem from 1952 Hollywood — briefly flashed back into stage life last week, when American Dance Machine for the 21st Century presented its "First Look" at what the new-formed company aspires to achieve in the future.

Staged before an invited audience in a studio at New York City Center, the hour-long program excitingly re-created the original choreography and emotional context for contrasting selections from "Contact," "A Chorus Line," "Jerome Robbins' Broadway" and the film "Lovely to Look At." Donna McKechnie and Marge Champion are among the original artists who coached the dancers on how to reveal their feelings as well as finesse their form. Prior to the concert, which featured 24 professional performers and a five-member band, a brief video disclosed the veterans working with the dancers during two weeks of rehearsals.

**"South Orange native Nikki Feirt Atkins heads a company that re-creates theater dance classics."**

"First Look" is a sampler of artistic intentions provided by American Dance Machine for the 21st Century — ADM21 for short — a Manhattan-based company established earlier this year by Nikki Feirt Atkins, who grew up in South Orange and fondly recalls playing the leads in musicals staged at Columbia High School.

A former professional dancer now in private medical practice as a pathologist, Atkins remained involved in dance projects. As its name suggests, ADM21 is inspired by the American Dance Machine, a company that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s as a "living archive" of musical theater dance but did not long survive the 1989 death of its founder, choreographer Lee Theodore.

Atkins, who once studied dance with Theodore, is heading ADM21 as its executive director in tandem with notable choreographer Margo Sappington, who is the company's artistic director. Their manifold vision includes: Establishing a resident troupe to perform historically accurate depictions of vintage stage and film dance works; developing a training facility and curriculum for students as well as professional dancers; and maintaining an archive of musical theater dance works.

"The current enthusiasm for musical theater and dance as a result of television programs such as 'Glee,' 'Smash' and 'Dancing with the Stars' further underscores our vision," noted Atkins. "It is our intention to empower this new generation of dancers and

choreographers with a comprehensive resource to the history and techniques that fueled the best stage and screen musical theater dances."

"The dances you will see tonight were not created in a void," explained Sappington as she introduced the "First Look" program, which she directed. "They were designed to further a show's plot and mood. These dances are not simply entertainment — they are meant to tell stories."



Both Sappington and Atkins stress the importance of situating each dance within the dramatic context of the musicals they enhance.

So before Rebecca Riker launched into choreographer Michael Bennett's famous "Music and the Mirror" solo dance from "A Chorus Line," she exchanged several minutes of dialogue with actor Derek Hanson, who played the director who may or may not give her character a job. Similarly, Charles Askegard and Nina Goldman traded semi-sweet nothings from the "Lovely to Look At" screenplay prior to drifting off together into Hermes Pan's romantic ballroom style choreography for "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes."

According to Atkins, ADM21 currently is in the process of raising an initial \$250,000 to reach its next stage of development. In the meantime, the company plans to present several more private showings as well as participate in industry galas with an eye towards producing a full-scale dance program at the Joyce Theater in the fall of 2013.