

Dance master who broke all the rules

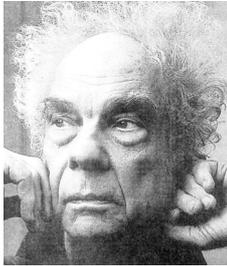


Photo Annie Leibowitz

Ismene Brown talks to Merce Cunningham, this century's most influential - some would say diabolical - choreographer

“His work is about dancing. The music can be offputting, but there's no difficulty with the dancing”

MERCE Cunningham happened to 20th-century dance like a cold shower. Some people have never forgiven him. Fury is a reaction you often come across in the 50 years of reviews that have followed his progress - outrage and distress at the way he trashed ballet, sucked out all the emotion, and put terrible ideas into the minds of the younger generation.

In place of romance he offered abstract geometry; in place of female-dominated love stories he offered impersonal, asexual dancers; in place of melodic, musical steps, he plonked his choreography at the last minute onto weird, unrelated soundscapes.

In person, at the very least he should be sprouting horns - and yes, there is something faintly horn-like about the way his grey curls spring defiantly from his knobbly 78-year-old forehead. There is indeed a chilly moment when he briefly shows regret that a human head cannot revolve three times as it can on his beloved computer-choreography program.

Mostly, though, he is a total surprise: a courtly, soft-voiced, elfin gentleman, who speaks simply and defuses bewilderment with a little apologetic “heh-heh-heh!” when it gets complicated.

I met him in New York last month ahead of the performances of his gigantic piece *Ocean* at the new-look Belfast Festival this week. Although Britain has often heard tell of this American who is widely judged the most significant dance innovator of the 20th century, and who has influenced almost all subsequent choreographers (often badly), it has had few chances to see his dances.

Ocean was conceived by Cunningham and the avant-garde composer John Cage (best-known perhaps for a piece of silence called 4' 33"). Their 47-year collaboration was one of those rare, incendiary meetings of dance and music minds that marked dance history, like

Sarah (the original Pina Bausch) or her master piece *Appalachian Spring*). At her studio in

“I do the cooking,” said Cage once, slyly, “and Merce washes the dishes.” He might have been talking about their private life (Cage had a wife early on but the two men lived together for a long time), or about their working relationship. Cage cooked up *Ocean* in 1991, then died. Cunningham not only washed but arranged the dishes in the most lavish of displays, which can hardly ever be performed.

This is the musical description. “*Ocean 1-95* is 90 minutes long: it is 32,067 events spread over 2,403 pages, divided among 112 musicians. There are five layers of sound, each having a sequence of 19 compositions, whose rules are constantly changing. Players enter each composition with instructions from 76 different sets of performance practices...”

This sort of thing seems calculated to antagonise. Cunningham, by contrast, is refreshingly simple about his side of things. “We always figured, John and I, that an hour and a half is the length of a movie. OK. The dancing takes place in a circle in the centre. The public sits 360 degrees around. The 112 musicians surround the public, seated separately if possible. The principle for the sound is that it surrounds, like a bath of water. OK. In the middle there are 15 dancers. There is no front, in the conventional sense. Any place you are sitting at is the front.”

Piece of cake, so far. It gets harder when Cunningham explains how his *mise-en-scène* affected the choreography. This sounds like a nightmarishly vast Rubik’s cube. Basically he wanted to give every member of the audience his best shot. Because his dancers can be seen from all angles, every individual motion had to be fashioned in the round.

Then you must add in the fact that the combinations of the dancers had to look good from every seat. And finally - the special fiendish Cunningham touch - that the combinations had to work even if you generated their individual components *at random*.

The permutations turn the brain to porridge.

Cunningham likes to roll I-Ching dice or toss coins to determine what happens when in his pieces. It is another unique bit of rule-breaking; most dance choreography is fashioned to look inevitable, organic, logical.

He says that his experimental method revealed to him something “for a *millimeter* of a second about Einstein’s theory of the curvature of space”, but then quickly adds that the spectator doesn’t have to worry about Einstein too.

“No, no, no, just come and look. And listen. No, no, it’s absolutely visual, and any philosophical ideas you want to have that’s fine. But just come and have a different kind of visual and audible experience.”

Watching his dance is no different, essentially, from seeing life in the street, he says: things happening with purpose but randomly assorted. You look wherever you feel inclined.

“I *hate* being told how to look at something. Say a child has never seen a tree; you could keep trying to explain it to him, or you could let him see one, and it becomes an experience of his own.”

WHAT made Mercier Philip Cunningham, the smallville lawyer’s son, so perverse? Possibly one can blame Maude Barrett. She was his first dance teacher, a wacky woman in her fifties who disconcerted parents of her little pupils by tying her long skirts down and walking on her hand, chatting away all the while. “She had a nice lively mind,” says Cunningham approvingly.

He loved Fred Astaire, did vaudeville and ballet, and became so good - tall, nimble, charismatic - that Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, America’s two high priestesses of dance, fought over him. Graham won, and Cunningham became her leading man for six y

ears (he was the original Preacher in her masterpiece *Appalachian Spring*). At her studio in 1941 occurred another indelible encounter.

Helen Keller - blind and deaf - paid a visit. Graham guided her hands to the waist of Merce Cunningham, as he sprang up and down at the barre. "So light, like the mind," said Keller of her first encounter with dance.

More than 50 years later "I can still feel the hands," says Cunningham wonderingly. "They were like bird's wings. But the *remark* is so amazing."

The remark is true of his work too, which, unlike that of his former boss Martha Graham, shows no sign of diminishing in old age. These days, though, he has finally stopped appearing in his own dances, where he looked frighteningly frail. He takes a long time to get up in the morning, having a bowl of cereal and sketching birds and flowers to clear his mind before going into his computer room. Technology is cumbersome, not at all a short cut to choreography, he says, but "it fascinates me. It's a new angle on movement. There is always another possibility, even if I don't see it."

The irony is that the alien methods command more column inches than his spectacular ability to make the human body look beautiful. (London can judge next summer when his company brings his 1997 works to the Barbican.)

There isn't much difference between him and the English ballet choreographer Frederick Ashton, assert Cunningham's distinguished archivist, David Vaughan, author of a massive new book about his 50-year career, as well as of the definitive book on Ashton's ballets.

"I always felt that putting dance into watertight compartments was wrong. I love Ashton's work because it's about *dancing*. And Merce's work is about *dancing*. The music he uses can be offputting, but about the dancing there's no difficulty - this is wonderful work."