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### **Who is the greatest?**

***Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, the two giants of modern dance, come to Britain this season - one pushing his computer buttons, the other transposing the rhythms of life. Ismene Brown compares them***

#### TEXT AS SENT

Merce Cunningham is stooped and arthritic these days, the 20th century's most controversial choreographer now an 81-year-old man garlanded with the world's approbation, rather than the eggs and tomatoes in the face that once he courted. Paul Taylor at 70 is still remarkably tall and craggily handsome, though his face is marked by exhausting struggles to stave off his company's insolvency, money not coming in as freely as international awards.

One of them is "the world's greatest living choreographer". Or the other one is. They have both been called it, by rival camps. They are the twin faces of contemporary dance - the one experimental, abstract, visual, the other athletic, emotional, musical. The followers of dance divide fiercely on who is the master, with Taylor commanding delight from those who find Cunningham abstruse, and the Cunninghamites sometimes guilty of scorning Taylor for being too "accessible".

It is, of course, the best possible thing to revel in both. Between them, they have laid out the palette with which almost all contemporary dance today is painted. And by an extraordinary coincidence, they are about to come to Britain, so that we can see their contrasting work for ourselves.

No one needs reminding what a year 2000 has been for classical ballet-lovers, but in years to come those who love modern dance will recall the almost unprecedented opportunity it gave them to see the finest creators of the golden age of American modern dance. Not only did we have the charming Mark Morris last summer at the Coliseum, but (tonight) Cunningham opens at the Barbican and next month Taylor visits Sadler's Wells, with the bonus of Trisha Brown coming to tour Britain at the same time. Though less famous than her elders, nowadays she is probably even more influential than they.

Brown, now 63, is Cunningham's spiritual successor, a fellow rule-breaker. Notoriously, 50 years ago, Cunningham chopped dance away from music, a revolutionary act, and has started a second revolution in the 1990s, by using computers to make choreography. Brown removed even the constraints of the theatre and technique from dancing - insisting on improvisation, and sending her dancers walking up skyscraper walls in harnesses, challenging the supremacy of the floor.

In comparison, Taylor, now 70, could be cast as a conservative, pursuing the opposite attraction of modern dancing to classical music played by live musicians. There's no "go figure" about Taylor - you just watch and feel, rather like his soul-brother Mark Morris. His couples are not units of movement but people making natural movements in a fast-flowing, musically expressive, acrobatic and even humorous kind of dancing. Until Taylor, laughs were out of order in modern dance.

What divides the two camps is a philosophy about what dance is: when you dance, are you doing something, or are you being something? Does movement always have an emotional meaning, or can it just be pure movement?

Where did two such different ideas come from? At least partly from the tiny, imperious, ground-breaking Martha Graham and her Hoover-like appetite for tall leading men. The six-foot Cunningham and even taller Taylor, considered the finest dancers of their generations, were both in her company - Cunningham in 'Appalachian Spring', for example; Taylor in 'Clytemnestra'. Cunningham was as magnetic and unpredictable as an animal, with sudden sharp changes of direction and instant jumps from nowhere. Taylor had the handsome muscular physique of a top swimmer (he swam for his university), stroking his way through the air with fluid, velvety power.

Graham's innovative choreography excited and taught both of them, but the heavy sexual dramas of "The House of the Pelvic Truth", as she called her style, came to repel them too. Cunningham left to experiment with the radical ideas of his friend, the maverick composer John Cage - "I wanted Dada, not Mama," he quipped. Six years later young Taylor got his first dancing job with Cunningham, and was one of his dancers at the debut performances that in 1952 began telling the public things about art that it wasn't sure it wanted to hear.

Shy Cunningham and the brilliant, verbose Cage were the hottest team in modernism, a magnet for innovative artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, all concerned with removing the question, "What does it mean?". Music, dance and design were all made separately and brought together at the last moment. And Cunningham further eliminated any associations of emotion or cause and effect to his dance by making it in chunks, and ordering them by the chance of a rolled dice or flipped coin.

Intellectuals had - and still have - a field day with it all, though it seemed quite simple to the makers. One of Cunningham's composers, Morton Feldman, explained: "It's like this. Say you're getting married, and I tell you the dress won't be made until the morning of the wedding. But I also tell you it's by Dior."

Paul Taylor himself had a go. Though he had by then joined Martha Graham, in 1957 he launched his modernist credentials by creating a work, '7 New Dances', in which dancers stood still in silence, which was reviewed by a critic, logically, with a blank space on the arts page. But then he decided that old music was just fine - it was on how the dancers moved that he stamped his new mark, using ideas he saw in the street. "I am a terrible spy," he says. "I watch people in their everyday lives, and their gestures which are so communicative, and so usable in dance."

Half a century on, these famous iconoclasts are now icons themselves. Twyla Tharp and Mark Morris have succeeded Taylor. Cunningham has been more difficult to follow, his methods being easier to talk about than pursue. For no matter how Frankensteinish his methods of creating choreography, the result is usually baffling but supremely

lovely the way wildlife is. You don't understand, but you don't need to. The Royal Ballet's choreographer Frederick Ashton, seeing the American avant-gardist's work in 1964, told him: "You are a poet and I like poetic ballets."

Cunningham's latest work, 'Biped', brought to London, heralds yet another new tomorrow, the marriage of computers and choreography. He uses a laptop to devise his steps, challenging the habits and logic of the body. "I look at some things the computer comes up with and say, 'Well, that's impossible for a dancer to do.' But if I looked at it long enough it could prompt my eye to see something I've never thought of before."

Richard Alston, the leading British contemporary choreographer (who premieres new work in Cambridge on Friday), says, "Merce has always been interested in dealing with awkwardness, as opposed to someone who makes movement flow, like Paul Taylor, or Trisha Brown even more."

I wondered who of them had the greatest influence these days in Britain. "There's no question about Cunningham's influence," replied Alston, "Apart from anything to do with choreography, he's an absolutely brilliant and influential teacher, so he's influenced choreographers in ways that Paul hasn't, because Paul hasn't been that master teacher. It's not a critical thing to say, it's simply a different kind of choreographer. Paul's dance language was very much based on his own style of dancing, whereas Merce, because his method was dealing with chance, had to devise a very clear and objective language. But having said all that, I think among younger choreographers Trisha is actually more influential now than either Merce or Paul."

Next to the intellectually challenging ideas of Brown and Cunningham, it isn't surprising that Paul Taylor has sometimes suffered. Yet in a sense his achievement is even greater. To make "pedestrian" movements better than pedestrian, to respond in modern terms to classical music and to the eternal human emotions, these are mountains. Taylor wrote in his autobiography, "Private Domain": "Although there is much to admire in the beauty of natural movement, much to derive from a pedestrian's smallest gesture, the most communicative dances, in my opinion, are those based on physical truths that in the making have been transformed for the stage into believability, by the artistry of calculated lies."

"The artistry of calculated lies" is as good a definition of choreography as you will find, and this wonderful autumn we will see the very greatest liars of our time working for our delectation.

*Merce Cunningham at the Barbican Theatre, today (Oct 10)-Saturday (020 7638 8891); Trisha Brown at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Nov 3-4, then touring (020 7960 4242); Paul Taylor at Sadler's Wells Theatre, Nov 7-11 (020 7863 8000). Richard Alston touring (020 7387 0324).*

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