



*Ismene Brown*

## Capturing a moment | 11 April 2019

The old magician's creations are deadlier than any other dead choreographer's work

📖 From magazine issue: 13 April 2019



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**O**n Tuesday, thousands of miles apart, in three great cities, London, New York and Los Angeles, 75 dancers will dance 100 solos in each venue in honour of the late iconoclastic choreographer Merce Cunningham, who would have turned 100 that day. It is a spectacularly ambitious wake for the choreographer who for 70 years denied

dance a dramatic or expressive face, and threw all norms of beginnings, middles and ends, of meaningful sequence or physical logic, into a bonfire of expectations.

This fabulous celebration, involving dancers of the whole spectrum from contemporary to the Royal Ballet, is a declaration of intent for posterity by the Cunningham Trust, established since his 2009 death to ensure digital preservation of 86 of his dances for future performance and study. Cunningham the iconoclast has been iconographed.

Dance is lousy at preserving itself, and Cunningham is unquestionably one of the 20th century's half dozen defining choreo-graphers, so careful posterity planning is theoretically a Good Thing. Yet there is a real sense of the bizarre in formulating means to repeat and reproduce perplexing, often magical danceworks that were, by planning, virtually unrepeatable, intended for impermanence and unplannedness.

He famously described dance as 'that single fleeting moment when you feel alive', hailing its vital ephemerality by contrast with the dead manuscripts, scores and pictures of the other arts. No other choreographer asked such good questions about dance, and posed them so dazzlingly: what is a start? Why is there a front? Where does it go in the space? When is next? Thickets of questions, enveloped in alluring artworks by America's greatest modernists and provoking sounds by its musical adventurers and experimentalists.

To watch a Merce Cunningham dance, it was mandatory that your ears, eyes, brain, imagination all had to switch on together at the moment the curtain went up, with no prior help. The component parts came together only at the première. For the next hour or two you'd be on your own. If you found links between things, good on you, but they weren't intended.

So you'd see a clock ticking down to zero and dancers spiralling in orbits; or a sinister tapestry of garbage; or floating silver Warhol balloons; or your eyes would be deceived by Robert Rauschenberg's coloured pointilliste spots that were part backdrop, part dancing costumes; or the trompe l'oeil would be sci-fi and digital, with translucent human beings darting inside a video fishtank.

You'd be hearing a Conlon Nancarrow player-piano clatter, or mournful mooing from the mop-haired improviser Takehisa Kosugi as he assaulted a broken violin, or the experimental band Sigur Ros might be in the pit bashing a marimba of pink ballet shoes.

As for the dancing itself, it was as grave and pure as if it had no contemporary reality at all. There'd be eight or ten performers, lithe and lightly poised on bare feet, classically lined, holding a strange pose for an age, or flicking by in quick jumps in the blink of an eye. They always seemed deliberately without identity, despite their physical variety.

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Chance being the master, you couldn't bet on anything gelling of its own accord. As Cunningham himself said, 'what to some is splendid entertainment, to others is merely tedium and fidgets'. A leading Rambert performer, Didy Veldman, once confessed to me that she hated dancing Cunningham pieces: 'I'm thinking what I'm going to eat tonight. I don't have any satisfaction whatsoever dancing something that abstract.' Today she says she remembers her trepidation then at seeing her blasphemy in print, but 'I wasn't in a minority, actually.'

Yet Cunningham's abstractness was not that different in aim from those great choral effects given to us from 19th-century classical ballet, corps de ballet scenes such as Marius Petipa's hallucinatory Kingdom of the Shades from *La Bayadère*, and Lev Ivanov's mass flockings of swans in *Swan Lake*, when the story halts but the spectator's emotions involuntarily erupt at the beauty of mass movement, each modulation and multiplication of unison plastique and rhythmic harmony.

Great choreography doesn't need to labour with synopses and theory to hit the spot. The blind, deaf and virtually dumb Helen Keller once placed her hands on young Merce's hips in a dance class to answer the question 'What is jumping?'

'I can still feel the hands,' the old man told me when I first met him in 1997, five decades later. 'They were like bird's wings, very slight. Here, you know, at my waist. And I was jumping at the barre, very lightly. And she said, "So light, like the mind." The remark is so amazing, one could not forget it.'

Light, like the mind. Not the heart or the human condition, which most other choreo-graphers would become obsessed with later. While Cunningham was reputed in conservative circles to have devil's horns — he and the Mephistophelian John Cage — it's more helpful to see him as the true heir of Mrs Maude Barrett, his first dance teacher out in Centralia, Washington state. At a school show Mrs Barrett tap-danced on to the stage in a long yellow dress talking to the parents and swinging Indian clubs, then whipped a band around her skirt and started walking on her hands. He never forgot the shock.

That taste for unexpectedness, as a perception, or wish, of what theatre ought to be, lurked formlessly until 1939 when young Merce met Cage at the incredibly free-thinking Seattle arts college run by Nellie Cornish, whose productions still sound challenging now, with percussion experiments, early musique concrète and lectures on Zen. Diaghilev had only been dead a decade and American classical ballet was only five years old at that point.

Famously, the youth became the mouldbreaking Martha Graham's faun-faced, spring-heeled leading man and muse in the Forties, for whom she invented eerie, compelling dance passages of choreography — he premiered *El Penitente*, *Letter to the World* and *Appalachian Spring*. But still more famous would be his devotion to chance decisions. Rather than structuring his dances, a coin flip or dice toss produced moment-by-moment happenings, a principle that he never abandoned (except, said Cage — who left his wife for Cunningham in 1945 — when they chose a restaurant for dinner).

He complicated it by applying Einstein's dictum, 'There are no fixed points in space', to the dance space. Hence this was a fiendishly intricate system. First, breaking dancers' trained habits and customising them. Second, creating discrete skeins of movement, to be sequenced and plaited on stage by chance decisions. Third, varying the point in time or place where sequences began and ended. Fourth and fifth, doing all that without people crashing into each other, but on the contrary looking indescribably elegant.

It was a hard road for a long time, he told me. 'I spent so many years in the beginning when they didn't think it was good. You'd get so tired you could barely move, and there wasn't any money, and I lived in a cold-water loft in New York and froze in the winter [laughter]. But still... I don't know how to say it, but I'm interested in looking for things that I don't know about.'

In 1991, he came across a computer program that could process dance moves, challenging his own habits of seeing. 'The body only moves certain ways, but the possibilities are endless. I mean, within the limits that you have two arms, two legs, not three, that you can't turn your head around three times. Which you can on the dance computer, but you know no one else can, so you don't bother — heh, heh!'

Digital choreography is old-hat now, and dancers are better, quicker learners, but Mark Baldwin, Rambert Dance's artistic director for 15 years, considers Cunningham's the most technically difficult choreography there is. 'It's like ballet from hips down, and modified Graham from hips up, and those two techniques fed into a new technique. The rhythms were never regular and constant, and the dancers had to keep together by counting internally. Cunningham is one of the rare choreographers who really used *petit batterie* and unusual beats, and very sustained slow *adages*, with twists in the back. Ballet dancers are great at using feet and arms, but often the torso isn't engaged and the strength isn't there. Merce's combinations of top half speaking to bottom half went on forever.'

Such ambitiousness and curiosity is almost unseen today. For that reason alone, Cunningham's challenges to dancers' skills should be transmitted, maybe used as ignition for their own creations.

But remastering the stage experiences is another ballgame altogether. Cunningham's personal, charming championing of chance — the vital element of his creativity — was part of the stagecraft, it sold the difficulty to the public. So the idea of filling USB sticks with instructions and ingredients for companies' faithful re-enactment of those 'fleeting moments' on stage is most odd, even oxymoronic. Ballets are written with a long-established language to be reperformed again and again, and many modern choreographers' work is perfectly reproducible. However, Cunningham seemed unique because of his core belief in chance and surprise. He was a vaudevillian, he was Mrs Barrett's boy.

How much more entertaining, surprising and fitting it would be to have a

centennial bonfire of all those instructions. No matter how digitally pickled and caringly anatomised, the old magician's creations are exquisite corpses now, deader than any other dead choreographer's work. The bones can be picked but the heartbeat can't be restarted. Merce Cunningham's legacy is intangible, Einsteinian. It is a new appreciation of the time and space we move in.

*Night of 100 Solos ends the Barbican Centre's current festival of Cunningham centennial events and will be livestreamed from all three cities.*

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