

Dance In Context

Lectures: 18/19.2.19

Lecture Content: You will gain an understanding of Merce Cunningham, dance maker, collaborator, innovator

You will also discuss "What Has Become of Postmodern Dance? Answers and Other Questions by Marcia B. Siegel, Anna Halprin, Janice Ross, Cynthia J. Novack, Deborah Hay, Sally Banes, Senta Driver, Roger Copeland, and Susan L. Foster"





MERCE CUNNINGHAM (April 16, 1919 – July 26, 2009)

“Merce Cunningham was one of the greatest American dance artists.

His seven-decade career was distinguished by constant innovation in which he expanded the frontiers of contemporary art, visual arts, performing arts, and music.”

Merce Cunningham Trust

"You have to love dancing to stick to it.

**It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls ...
It is not for unsteady souls.”**

Merce Cunningham

MERCE CUNNINGHAM (April 16, 1919 – July 26, 2009)

American modern dancer

Choreographer who developed new forms of abstract dance movement

EARLY YEARS

Cunningham began studying dance at 12 years of age

Attended the Cornish School of Fine and Applied Arts in Seattle, Washington for two years

Studied at Mills School (1938) with dancer and choreographer Lester Horton

At Bennington College (1939) Graham asked him to join her company

Quickly became a soloist in which he created many important roles

BEGINNING A CAREER AS A CHOREOGRAPHER

Cunningham began to choreograph in 1943, encouraged by Graham

Among his early works were *Root of an Unfocus* (1944) and *Mysterious Adventure* (1945)

Met composer John Cage (his life partner)

Left Graham's company in 1945 and began to work professionally with Cage

They went on to create annual recitals in New York City with works such as:

The Seasons (1947)

Inlets (1978)

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY

In 1952 Cunningham formed his own dance company

Dancers were the likes of Paul Taylor, Carolyn Brown

Composers were John Cage and David Tudor

First International Tour – 1964 – Europe and Asia

From 1971 until 2012, the company was based in the Westbeth Artists Community in West Village, NYC

THE CUNNINGHAM DANCE FOUNDATION

Formed in 1964 to fulfil Cunningham's artistic vision

Operated:

Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC)

Merce Cunningham Studio and School

CUNNGINHAM TECHNIQUE

Technique classes – formalised structure

Rigorous training method

Develops strength, clarity and flexibility

Spine/torso and legwork – in coordination or in opposition

Multiple changes in direction / spatial awareness – dancer's front shifts, body parts move in different directions

Rhythmic accuracy – tempos and rhythm in class work

CHOREOGRAPHIC STYLE

Disregarding narrative and form

Non-representational – Movement for movement's sake

Cunningham's abstract dances vary greatly in mood

A reaction to Graham and ballet perhaps

Abandoned traditional structures of dance

Characteristic for their abrupt changes and contrasts in movement

Many of his works have been associated with Dadaist, Surrealist, Existentialist motifs

CHOREOGRAPHING BY CHANCE

Cunningham was intrigued by the potential of random phenomena as determinants of structure

Inspired also by the pursuit of pure movement, to be devoid as possible of emotional implications

Developed “choreography by chance”

Isolated movements were assigned sequence by random methods i.e. tossing a coin

Works created in this method for example are:

Sixteen Dances for Soloist (1951)

Company of Three (1951)

In *Suite by Chance* (1952) the movement patterns were created with chance

Experimented with variable of designs in works such as *Story* (1963)

He “wasn’t interested in making sure audiences puts the elements together to ”get” a particular message from the dance event, but rather in presenting a variety of experiences – aural, visual, kinetic – which the spectator is free to interpret, select from, or simply absorb.” (Sally Banes 1980)

COLLABORATION

Integral to his work and legacy

Composers – John Cage, David Tudor

Designers – Robert Rauschenber (created designs for earlier works), Jasper Johns and Mark Lancaster

Artists – Andy Warhol, Tacita Dean and Roy Lichtenstein

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC

Suite by Chance was also the first modern dance to be performed to an electronic score (commissioned from American experimental composer Christian Wolff)

Symphonie pour un homme seul (1952; later called *Collage*) was performed to Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's composition

First performance in the United States of musique concrète
(Music constructed from tape-recorded environmental sounds)

Cage and Cunningham would create separately

EVENTS

In 1974 he abandoned his company's repertory

Created "Events"

Excerpts from old or new dances, sometimes two or more simultaneously

VIDEO DANCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Choreography created expressly for videotape, which included *Blue Studio: Five Segments* (1976)

He also began working with film and created *Locale* (1979)

Later dances included:

Duets (1980)

Fielding Sixes (1980)

Channels/Inserts (1981)

Quartets (1983)

Cunningham created animated computer programme DanceForms in 1990s

Created pieces with digital artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, ie *BIPED* and *Hand-drawn Spaces*

Mondays with Merce – videocasting in 2000s

1990S TO 2009

Allowed him to explore new choreographic possibilities as he suffered with arthritis

Cage died in 1992, Cunningham continued to lead his dance company until shortly before his own death

Set up MC Trust to protect his works and legacy in 2000

Legacy Plan written in 2009

The core elements of which were:

- a final two-year world tour of the dance company
- extensive preservation of Cunningham's work
- closure of both the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and Cunningham Dance Foundation
- financial assistance to the dancers and other CDF staff to help transition to new employment
- an extensive fundraising campaign to fund the plan (Legacy Plan, 2009)

Cunningham died in 2009 – his works are still performed today under license

LINKS

Mondays with Merce =

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/dance-blog/2014/jul/25/remembering-merce-cunningham-five-contemporary-dance-videos>

Technique - <https://www.mercecunningham.org/the-work/cunningham-technique/>

Works

Beach Birds - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IH_rrpj0CU

BIPED - <https://vimeo.com/280542682>

Variations - <https://youtu.be/yOAagU6cfBw>