



Merce Cunningham Collaborations

by

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Merce Cunningham and his Dance Company return to Sadler's Wells from July 21 to August 1 but before that there will be two very different opportunities of seeing his work. On July 16 the BBC is scheduled to broadcast a video dance work called *Points in Space*. This was rehearsed in New York, then filmed in London, during the spring of 1986 and is a collaboration between BBC Television, the Cunningham Dance Foundation and BBC Enterprises. Sue Merrett describes the work in progress. Then, on July 19, at the Royal Albert Hall the company will perform the Cunningham/Cage work *Roaratorio* at the Henry Wood Promenade Concert—the first appearance of contemporary dance at a Prom.

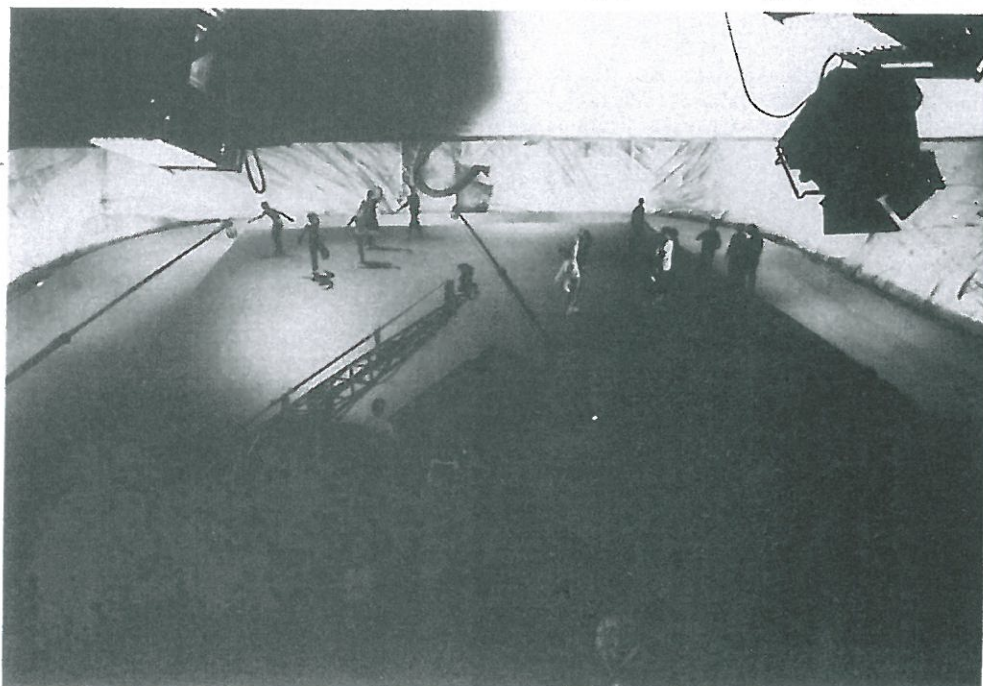
THE silence is intense, broken only by heavy breathing. The heavy breathing is from the dancers concentrating not only on their steps, but, more important in this instance, on their relation to the video camera looming before them. They are used to dancing for cameras almost as much as for a live audience, because these are the dancers of Merce Cunningham's company, and Cunningham has been one of the pioneers in video dance.

Cunningham has been a pioneer in more ways than just dance on film. In his own words, he never became a dancer, he has always been one. There has been no time in his life when he cannot remember dancing, from early days with a Mrs Barrett in local theatres and cinemas, and then "on tour" when they would perform in between the movies, or in club houses. An abortive try at the University of Washington ended with his going to the Cornish School in his home town of Seattle. Here he first became acquainted with the work of Martha Graham, taught by Bonnie Bird, and also met composer John Cage. A year later, his visit to Mills College in California had him mixing with the entire Bennington School of Dance which was in residence at that time. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm were all there, and Martha Graham's invitation to join her company then took Cunningham to New York. At Graham's suggestion, Cunningham also trained for a while at the School of American Ballet, to be questioned by Lincoln Kirstein as to why he wanted to study ballet as his strengths lay in the modern dance field. But

Cunningham was interested in all types of dance and theatre.

In 1944 Cunningham and Cage conceived their first programme together. This comprised half a dozen solos, of a few minutes duration each, with very quick changes between (accomplished by the early training on Mrs Barrett's tours). In 1947 Cunningham was invited by Lincoln Kirstein to make a work for one of the Ballet Society programmes, and this, another collaboration with John Cage and designed by Isamu Noguchi, became *The Seasons*. By this time he had been away from the Graham company for two years, having worked with it from 1939 until 1945. Until 1953, when he founded his own company, life was hard. A little teaching paid the rent, and his solo performing programmes continued, with John Cage. It was on one of these that they first visited the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Here, Cunningham was to mix

with artists from many different fields. He had always been interested in music, largely through his association with Cage, and also with the visual arts. Cunningham continued to teach and choreograph, gradually building up a small number of students of his own, whom he then began to train in his own evolving technique. It was six of these students, including Viola Farber, Carolyn Brown, Remy Charlip and Paul Taylor, whom he took on a return visit to Black Mountain in 1953, to perform his own works and inaugurate the beginnings of his own company. Work continued, in shaky, cold studio lofts. Now his class usually starts with movements for the back, stretching and curving the spinal column, working hard on using the muscles connecting the back and legs. *Pliés* then follow, with corresponding arm movements to familiarise the dancer with co-ordinating the two. Certain balletic exercises, like *degagé* and *developpé*, are used, but the



Right, the filming of *Points in Space* in London. Above, Merce Cunningham at a camera. Photographs by Robert Hill, BBC.

Right, Helen Barrow, Merce Cunningham, Catherine Kerr and Megan Walker during filming.

main concentration is in the lower torso, to give it freedom. The legwork comprises rapid combinations, *épaulement* comes from lower down the trunk. Many of the exercises come from the dances he makes — *Torse* was the first major one. His work has a continuous flow, the reason for which Cunningham jokingly puts down to years of working in cold studios. His classes also take note of the individuals, both physically and temperamentally.

With his small company Cunningham became experimental, working with contemporary composers and designers and trying to choreograph from varying approaches — space always being the main criterion. His dances had many inspirations — *Canfield*, made in 1969, derived from a card game of solitaire; *Scramble* has a section where the dancers are invited to move independently through a performing space, and with this and other works like *Fast Dance* Cunningham has the flexibility to change the directions to accommodate certain performing spaces. *Sounddance* was a reaction to the classical bodies he had worked with during the creation of *Un jour ou deux* for the Paris Opéra Ballet.

One of Cunningham's unconventional approaches to choreography has been over the collaboration, or as some might say non-collaboration, with his composers and designers. In 1952 choreographer and composer began to create with only minimal collaborative points: length, rhythm and certain key sections. This has been taken even further with the introduction of simultaneity — the duration of the piece being known, dance and music would then proceed independently. The dancers rehearse in silence, to a stop-watch. Only in the last stages do the two components come together, along with the design also produced independently from only a hint of an idea.

Work on video began in the early 70s, shortly after the company moved into its current rehearsal/administrative area in Westbeth, a large building for artists down on Manhattan's West Side. Cunningham realised that the visual nature of dance would soon link it with television, and with the arrival of an Assistant Stage Manager, Charles Atlas, who had worked in movies, the experiments began. The first piece was called *Westbeth*. Questions were asked — how to change distance between camera and dancer? how to cut from one camera to another without interrupting the dance rhythm and flow? how to tape a number of dancers doing different movements in different directions, yet keeping all in shot? The next experiment, *Blue Studio*, was done in a very small space. *Fractions I* started as a video piece (and later became a stage work). There is a commercial video now available (in the States) of three Cunningham pieces: *Channels/Inserts*, *Locale* and *Fractions I*. In video pieces Cunningham himself has to be the selector of what the audience will see, unlike the individ-



ual choice in a theatre/performing situation. In order to keep all performers in shot, the camera's depth of field has to be used to the full. (When a video dance is transferred to the stage, there have to be adjustments in the spacing). Cunningham then began to use groups, moving from one to the other. Decision on items like a stretched or bent arm (to keep within shot) had to be made, so Cunningham prepared himself with various alternatives before shooting. Exits and entrances took on different meanings, and had different problems from stage ones. This all required a great deal of flexibility for which Cunningham became amply prepared.

A visit to Westbeth on a sunny afternoon in April 1986 found Cunningham rehearsing his company for the video work *Points in Space*, commissioned by the BBC. The studios are at the top of a large building on the edge of Greenwich Village. On stepping out of a lethargic lift, one is confronted by some large potted palms, hung about with the injunction "do not lean bikes on plants". The bikes lean elsewhere. To the west, are views of the Hudson River while the main studio windows reveal the skyline of mid-town Manhattan. But today the blinds are down, and the hazy sunshine which finds its way in turns into a pale blue on the monitor screen.

The making of the video was suggested during the company's 1985 season at Sadler's Wells when, during an after-show dinner, the idea was first put to Cunningham. He was in favour, but a time needed to be found which would make it a viable proposition for the company. This was forthcoming when a lay-off period became likely between the New York City Center season and a visit to Munich, the combination with a trip to Europe making financial sense. Four weeks — in New York and London — for rehearsal and shooting were available. Cunningham's long-time collaborator, John Cage, was commissioned to create the score. At the time of rehearsal no one had heard this; Cunningham was working to time-

duration only, in his usual fashion. The score, which later was to receive the title "Voiceless Essay", would be added to the pre-filmed dance. Cage had been working on a "computer selection of words" (this was based on the words *Messe des pauvres*, the letters of which were made into a vertical column then had random words and phrases attached horizontally). The amalgam was then read by Cage himself, before being sent to the Brooklyn Computer Center where 3,000 computer man-hours were spent in layering the tape of Cage's voice into a thickly textured voice synthesis. The decor had been entrusted to Dove Bradshaw, another regular collaborator with Cunningham. His brief had simply been to provide a backcloth to do with "weather", while costume-designer Bill Anastasi had been asked for costumes divided into two groups: leopard spots and tonal stripes. The backcloth was being made in London; the costumes, of practical necessity, in New York. All this geographically spread activity would come together for the first time in London. In the meantime, Cunningham is creating his dance.

There is a family feel to the session. The girl on the clapper board is a student. The co-director with Cunningham, Elliot Caplan, and the girl on the video equipment are company members. The only outsiders are Bob Lockyer, the BBC producer whose idea this was, and his assistant. Cunningham himself, although due to perform in the finished work, refrains from appearing for much of the time. He is intent on the monitor, leaving it occasionally to demonstrate a move, and indicate a placing.

In May the work continues in London. Five days of rehearsal and recording are allocated in the BBC TV Centre's studio TC1. One reason why the BBC is filming this programme is because there are few television companies in the States with studios large enough to accommodate such a project, and those with the large studios are reluctant to risk such an aesthetic venture. The Studio TC1 is large, accommo-

dating a 48 foot platform stage. This is hung on three sides by Bradshaw's backcloth, conceived in three sections, and marvellously realised by the BBC production department's work on enlarging the collage design — which included bits of sellotape and torn paper. True to the "weather" directive, parts look like an approaching storm — the colours disturbed with greys and blacks like rain-slashed skies; a burst of crimson suggests a sunset; a splash of blue — some clear sky searched for on a showery day; the white — some snow-covered ground. More precise forms take the shape of wedges, a horseshoe of black, scribbles of colour like a test-pad for ball-point pens. On the TV screen the huge, curving cloth loses its massiveness as it dwarfs the dancers and crew beneath. Above the platform is a grid crowded with hanging lamps, each identified by a number. Some are focused on the dance area, some on the backcloth, and some on the white cloth in front are used to reflect and diffuse the light.

The cameras to be used are listed in the script with delightful informality: Mole, Nicky, Icky plus dolly (!), and Ped. A tulip-crane is called for the last three days of shooting, this is a remote control camera that lurks uncannily, silently zooming in where required, free of its perched cameraman. The other cameras are operated manually, as is the sound boom, worked by a grey haired man on a small platform pushed around by two technicians. More technicians negotiate the coils of cable on one of the cameras, looking like outsize sparrows on a telegraph wire. All concentrate on the work being done on the platform. Here the dancers work silently, some clad in the "spots" (more a dappled effect of pale greens, pinks and black), and some in the "stripes" (graded colours on their unitards). A dancer's eye checks the position of the camera. The monitor shows that the camera has now panned to the blue background, and the "take" is at the end. There is a buzz of noise, but the dancers continue to work on trickier moments of partnering. "OK?" Cunningham stares hard at the screen. Cathy Kerr is not satisfied. She had bumped into someone. The "take" happens again. The intense silence is broken only by the padding of bare feet, which is being recorded. The studio inmates then cluster round a monitor to check the last "take". The grizzled head of Cunningham is surrounded by his young company. The tension is broken as the film is run backwards, and the dancers relish the Keystone Cops effect. The video runs — "that looks good" breathes a dancer watching the screen. The out-of-work camera droops dejectedly; still running, it focuses in a desultory manner on some discarded coffee cups, then swings aimlessly to view Cunningham's feet, bunched knottily in his worn ballet slippers. Another monitor has a momentary touch of a horror movie as a grasping outsize hand approaches, but it is only someone changing the camera lens. Yet another monitor focuses on the etched silhouette of a cameraman and camera against a brilliant background; a surreal pattern is made by man and complex machinery. And yet another catches the perfectly proportioned head and slender neck of

Karen Fink in profile, requiring only a suitable head-dress to make her the Nefertiti of the twentieth century.

The take is satisfactory, and everyone is back rehearsing and running through the next item. Every move is checked through the monitor. "Too soon?" comes the question. "No, too late, and too far over". The dancer has obscured a colleague waiting in the distance. In section 4B1 there are three dancers walking to the right, who are slowly picked up by the moving camera, as they move away two posed figures loom close in front of the camera lens then disappear (and crawl away out of camera range as the shot passes). Placing is crucial. Although dancers are familiar with placing on stage, for camera work the placing has to be much more precise. A matter of a few inches can make all the difference. In one section a girl, close to the camera, suddenly rises and continues into a backbend, like a dolphin jumping out of the sea, and then disappears from view. But two dancers behind her are having trouble. Cunningham suggests they "step forward six inches". The step is taken and the dancers then bend and scrape away at the floor in order to remove the marker and replace it in its new position. They try again. Still a problem. Rob Remley calls "I can pull it in", as Cunningham decides to widen the frame, but the next camera rehearsal shows that by pulling the camera back a matter of inches, the "dolphin" lady's movement has lost its effect. Eventually all seems ready for a "take". The make-up lady is approached for powder on a shiny nose and pancake on a toe plaster. The dancers peel off their leg warmers and tops, and drop them over the edge of the platform. Silence. Concentration is one hundred per cent. Action. A girl, bent double to avoid blocking the light from a low rack of lamps, moves into position; another finishes her sequence and stays still at the front of the stage; in a whirling exit to the side of the platform another dancer is stopped by an out-of-shot colleague before he pitches over the edge. The last "take" is pronounced satisfactory, and the operation is over. A sense of relief increases. Already, being the last day, certain in-jokes have occurred: the coordinator, Elliot Caplan, normally wears a small peaked cap. This evening there is a sudden rash of multi-coloured peaked caps. The dancers pull on warm clothing, and the crew begins to dismantle cabling and cameras. Chris Komar, in tracksuit and glasses, picks his way across the coils of cable. He is the most long-standing member of Cunningham's company and has danced in many of Cunningham's video productions. Cables are familiar to him. All his creative life Cunningham has had his puzzled audience and his fervent admirers. His style is unusual. One viewing may not be enough to appreciate the barriers which he has broken and the new dimension which he has created. But, as with Fred Astaire and the movie dance stars, the recording of his work means that the generations of today and tomorrow have the chance to appreciate a pioneer talent in the present dance world and an explorer of new paths for the dance of the future.

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