



Cunningham, Merce (1919-2009)

by Jeffery Byrd

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One of the twentieth-century's most influential dancers and choreographers, Merce Cunningham is known for his innovations and originality. Adapting the theories of Marcel Duchamp and of his collaborator and partner John Cage, Cunningham pioneered in his use of chance in the creation of dance pieces and in a non-hierarchical approach to movement and staging.

Cunningham was born on April 16, 1919 in Centralia, Washington, the second of three sons of a successful attorney and his wife. He began studying dance at an early age. He attended the University of Washington for a year, then studied at the Cornish School for Performing and Visual Arts in Seattle, where he met composer John Cage, who was working there as an accompanist. The two eventually became life-long companions and artistic collaborators.

While studying in Seattle, Cunningham first became acquainted with the choreography of Martha Graham. In 1939, while attending a summer of dance classes at Mills College in Oakland, California, he met Graham, who then invited the young man to dance with her company in New York.

In the fall of 1939, Cunningham became only the second man to dance with Graham's company. He created several key roles in major pieces for her and became a soloist, but he eventually grew weary of her emphasis on narrative and psychological content. He wanted to explore movement through space in a more direct manner, without metaphoric overlay.

In 1942, Cage joined Cunningham in New York and by 1944 they had begun presenting their own programs. In 1947, the Ballet Society of New York (later known as the New York City Ballet) commissioned their work, "The Seasons." The ballet, with costumes and sets by Isamu Noguchi, proved a great success and established them as significant figures on the American dance scene.

Along with painters Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Cunningham and Cage became part of a circle of young gay artists whose ideas not only challenged the macho self-expressive Abstract Expressionists, who were to dominate the 1950s New York art scene, but also provided a model or alternative creative process that became the hallmark of post-modern art.

Influenced by Cage's use of chance in music, Cunningham applied the same thinking to dance and devised methods whereby decisions about movement sequences would be determined randomly and unpredictably. Retaining the turnout of classical ballet and the fluid upper body of modern dance, Cunningham also utilized many "ordinary" movements such as walking and running.

Cunningham deconstructed the traditions of Western stagecraft by placing equal emphasis on all parts of the performance space. In Cunningham's work, each dancer is considered the center of the space he or she occupies; wherever the dancer faces is "front." Together, Cunningham and Cage developed an aesthetic based on democracy of space and form in which all elements are considered equal in value.

In the summer of 1948, and each summer thereafter until 1957, when the college closed, Cunningham and Cage taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, an arts school known for its spirit of innovation. In 1952, at Black Mountain, they staged what is arguably the first multi-media event in America.

This work, entitled *Theater Piece #1*, combined elements of movement, music, visual art, and poetry, all presented simultaneously with no aspect dominating. This interdisciplinary approach became a hallmark of Cunningham's later work as he collaborated with luminaries from the worlds of visual art and music.

In 1953, Cunningham formed the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. By 1955, it began touring nationally. For over five decades, it has occupied a unique place in American dance. Still operating today, the company performs both new and revived works.

Ever the innovator, Cunningham embraced technologies such as film and video in the 1970s, producing works that are not merely recorded documents of live performances but video dance pieces unto themselves. In the 1990s, Cunningham began working with a complex computer program called Life Forms, which provides new methods for generating movements to be performed by dancers and which also allows for the creation of images to be used as projections in live performances.

Cunningham's work does not reveal itself as queer in terms of content. While other choreographers might employ same-sex duets to evoke such content, Cunningham does not, since the combination of dancers is often determined randomly. Indeed, Cunningham's work de-emphasizes gender altogether.

Insisting that his dances are not psychological or in any way "about" him, he eschewed an overtly political stance in favor of a collaborative model that may be said to represent a queering of the creative process. The creative artist is removed from the center of the artistic endeavor. All hierarchies are dismantled and all alternatives are considered equal.

Cunningham's relationship with Cage endured for 54 years, until Cage's death in 1992. The personal and professional collaboration between the two men made them role models for several generations of gay men and lesbians.

Now recognized as a seminal figure in twentieth-century American culture, Merce Cunningham received numerous prestigious awards and honors, including the National Medal of Arts and membership in the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters.

Active until the very end of his long life, Cunningham gradually relinquished day-to-day management of his dance company. On July 26, 2009, he died peacefully in his sleep in his Manhattan home.

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About the Author

Jeffery Byrd, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.