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## The music of chance

Ismene Brown

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**Take the world's greatest choreographer – Merce Cunningham, 85 – and ask him, at random, the questions set by eight of his younger admirers. The results, as Ismene Brown discovered, are fascinating**

Merce Cunningham's brain must be an extraordinary sight under a scan. For more than

50 years the American choreographer has clung to the opposite of the notion that inspires all civilisation: holding that decisions made by chance may be just as fine as those driven by logic and feeling. At 85, he remains ever productive, ever challenging, refusing the familiar.

He has famously drawn radical artists and composers to him, and if at his great age he turned back to reliable past colleagues, it would be pardonable. Yet for his latest work,

this old man sought youth and unfamiliarity. He asked two rock bands, Sigur Rós and Radiohead, a young British artist and an American photography student – all of them new to him – to supply scores and visuals.

Split Sides, which has its British première at London's Barbican next month, flamboyantly declares Cunningham's love of chance. There are two of everything: dance, costumes, set, music, lighting – and dice will be thrown on stage to decide each night's combination. Thirty-two possible variations. Then, to round off his company's first ever UK tour, on which every performance will be different, he will unveil a world première in Edinburgh. Phew. Does refusing to rely on familiarity rejuvenate the grey cells?

Visiting him in New York, it was distressing to see his infirmity – confined to a wheelchair, he complained quietly, he can no longer demonstrate his infernally complex manoeuvres to his dancers. And yet, judging from the quicksilver Split Sides, the mind trips as fantastically as ever.

I decided to scan his brain with questions supplied by eight of Britain's leading dance-makers. And I found the random principle came to my own rescue over what order to ask them. I made a bagful of numbered discs and shook them at him.

"It's rather complicated," he said, rummaging, "you should have used a dice." I don't have an eight-sided dice, I said. "But I do!"

Richard Alston asked about longevity, and Matthew Bourne about posterity. Siobhan Davies asked about emotion (which Cunningham tries to exclude from his work), and Akram Khan about spirituality. Jonathan Burrows, Michael Clark and Russell Maliphant cross-examined his adherence to chance, and Henri Oguike asked what he'd do if he weren't a choreographer. Bourne came up first – Cunningham says he has chased up a few old dances, and he films everything. But true dance preservation, he thinks, depends on better technology to record three-dimensional space – something like holography, only his company hasn't the money.

Davies pushed Cunningham on whether he really could resist taking pleasure if emotion bubbled up in his work.

"She sees something which is something special to her," he replied imperturbably. "If it happened among the dancers I wouldn't take it away because how each dancer does something is part of how they are as a person. But I wouldn't fix it up."

However, he did confess that he gets emotional about memories of old performers, and needs to put them out of mind when re-performing dances.

Khan asked whether Cunningham was purely an intellectual experimenter, or whether he felt a spiritual quest.

"If you start from all possibilities, it does become a laboratory," he agreed. But putting a dance before strangers' eyes changed its experimental nature, and he confessed that he

does find choreography a spiritual satisfaction – "It must be, or why would one bother continuing such a difficult art?"

For Alston, the puzzle was how Cunningham keeps going so rigorously.

"I don't know. The one thing I can say is that difficult though it is now in my physical condition, I remain fascinated by movement. I don't have any other reason. The other day it was, oh, on the television, watching the hurricane, and those trees, the movement of them. I've so often just watched people walk in the street."

But isn't that too simplistic? Cunningham's work is famously complex and anti-logical, uniquely so. He gets much of his movement by programming the "facts" of human movement into computer software and then permutating them randomly like a child's body-parts flick-book.

"When I started, I remember it was very difficult to do, very difficult to remember. Because it wasn't in one's own physical memory of familiarity."

Randomness, one feels, ought to result in ugliness – isn't that what civilisation implies? Yet what Cunningham edits from this time-consuming procedure is extraordinarily graceful, even classical-looking. His claim that there is no link between his choreography and the visuals and scores is more intractable, since these things so much affect the watcher's perception of the dance.

Maliphant wondered whether collaborators had ever influenced Cunningham. No, he said, "the principle is simple, that we are three separate identities that happen together."

Practicality is the only demand – he and John Cage once fired a composer who wanted to run around at random through the dance banging things.

Burrows and Clark both attacked Cunningham's belief in chance decisions. He had said that there is no thinking in his choreography, said Clark – how could choreography exist without thought?

"I think my saying that is a mistake," said Cunningham, "because there is thinking, but it's not about what the dancing refers to. It's about looking at a movement and not trying to add something, to let it be what it is – and to find that does take thinking."

I said that to me his dances look more like wildlife than humans – does he mistrust human logic? His voice rose:

"There was certainly some kind of logic in our present government going to war with Iraq, but what kind of logic, and what kind of use has it been?"

So is he trying to get away from the world through his dance?

"No, I think it's given me a way, personally, to be. To be able to look at this craziness that we live in and find a way to continue. I mean, look at this society. It's frightening. Well

we live in and find a way to continue. I mean, look at this society. It's frightening. Well, if that's what you want to deal with, fine. But I don't. I don't think I'm wary... well, in a way I am. But without men's minds opening up, we wouldn't have progress.

"Logic has led us in certain ways, and then somebody comes up, like Einstein, who shows logic is nonsense, that there is something else."

It was Einstein's remark that there are no fixed points in space that launched Cunningham's decision that the performing space need have no fixed "front". His other central influence is his late partner John Cage's principle of indeterminacy, or randomness. But, Burrows asked, Cunningham had never gone all the way, he didn't let the dancers determine what was danced as musicians were allowed to play at random.

"First of all, I like to make movement!" Cunningham laughed gently. "Selfish, I know, but it's what I do. For a soloist, indeterminacy is quite possible, but when you have two or more people in indeterminacy, there are possible collisions."

It's a very controlling method after all, I say. Cunningham is only applying chance to ingredients he has fixed.

Yes, he agrees, but "the complexity of working this way is fiendish, but fascinating. Chance does not make you comfortable! It does not make me comfortable! Heh heh! But at the same time I find it an eye-opener."

In life too?

"Yes." Throw the dice? "Well... like crossing the street?" He laughed. "Not any more, I must admit." (Cage once said that he wouldn't apply indeterminacy to choosing a restaurant.)

To Oguike's question about another career, he replied, "Something visual." He draws wildlife constantly, and has an elite collection of art by collaborators such as Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg. To it he'd like to add the ravishing little xylophone of ballet shoes that Sigur Rós made for Split Sides. "Oh, I'd love to have that! But I think it might be theirs."

So, I asked, what did he think about the choreographers' questions?

"Well, they all centred on themselves, didn't they? And that's not the way I work."

Yet I thought they'd uncovered the man inside the demon scientist rather well.

Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Barbican Theatre, London EC2, Oct 5-9 (0845 120 7550); then first UK tour to Sheffield, Salford, Coventry, Oxford, Brighton and Edinburgh (world première, Festival Theatre, Oct 29-30, 0131 529 6000). Dance Umbrella inquiries: 020 8741 5881.

## **Cunningham through the years**

**1919** Born April 16 in Centralia, Washington, to a small-town lawyer, second of three

sons. Studied dancing locally.

**1938** Met composer John Cage (born 1912) at the progressive Cornish School of Arts, Seattle. Influenced by Zen Buddhism, Dada and American Indian spirit dancing.

**1939** To New York to join Martha Graham Dance Company, became her leading man.

**1941** Visiting Graham, the blind Helen Keller learned what dance was by touching Cunningham as he jumped. He never forgot her remark: "So light, like the mind."

**1944** In Martha Graham's Appalachian Spring, Cunningham played the rabid Preacher, choreographing his own solo. First dance concert with Cage.

**1945** Left Graham to go independent. 1952 Black Mountain College, North Carolina, Cage and Cunningham's first "event", a collage of chance "happenings".

**1953** Cunningham company debut in New York. The only review, in a German paper, headlined: "Dance led astray."

**1955** First US tour, in a camper van with Cage, artist Robert Rauschenberg, five dancers and two musicians.

**1964** First world tour and London debut. Critic Alexander Bland wrote: "Diaghilev would have loved Cunningham."

**1979** First film-dance, Locale, launched a decade of exploring dance on camera.

**1990** Started choreographing with computer software.

**1992** Cage died. Cunningham returned to work the next day on Enter.

**1994** Ocean, an epic circular work.

**1999** BIPED, futuristic visions with motion-capture video, performed in UK.

**2003** Tate Modern Event under Olafur Eliasson's gigantic sun installation. Split Sides premièred in New York.

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