



Merce Cunningham: a moving human sculpture in air

Merce Cunningham's dances were nature's creatures, maybe the most alive dances ever made.

By [Ismene Brown](#)

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I never expected to fall in love when I first saw Merce Cunningham's dances. As a musician of sternly classical upbringing, and a lover of ballet for the baroque theatrical means by which it conveyed simple truths about good and evil, I was ready to sign up to the hordes who denounced Cunningham as a heartless Dr Frankenstein, the man who jangled dancers' bones in inhuman combinations, who rebutted feeling and music, and was sending dance down a cul-de-sac to a robotic death.

But I went, and what rubbish all that turned out to be. "Everything looked diamond-cut," I noted. "Women tiptoed on, their stretched feet extraordinarily beautiful. A longing pas de deux was followed by another pair making wonderful cat's-cradles with their limbs; great, high lifts sang over still, quiet notes on the floor. It is music, dance's

own music.” Cunningham’s death feels like a personal loss in a way that the recent death of the high priestess of witty, sinister emoting, Pina Bausch, does not. She represented the choreographers who create just enough movement vocabulary to express their ideas; he was the man who maintained that dance was the only idea. Odd which cuts deeper.

On a desert island list Cunningham would appear in many people’s favourite eight choreographers. But which to save when the waves came? I believe I would have to spurn Balanchine to save Cunningham. With all other choreographers you needed a wooden stage, wings, curtains. Cunningham’s dances seemed to me nature’s creatures, maybe the most alive dances ever made, written in air, or on a beach, for a body to do, needing nothing else.

Regardless of the deliberately obscure accompanying artworks and diversionary 'chance procedures', of computerised marvels in 'Biped' or stopwatches in 'Ocean', you were constantly being delighted with the complete three-dimensional human dancing figure, fashioned by Cunningham so that the front was any part of the dancer you were looking at, where the space behind the back or knee was as much part of the sculpture as the face. His dance was a moving human sculpture in air, unmistakable in its lusciously extended lines and microscopically filigreed detail, every second and every angle thought through. Simply, he made people try to dance more ravishingly and thoroughly, for dance’s own sake, than had ever been asked.

Only Petipa, the perfecter of classical ballet, seems to me to have had a similarly spatial sense of the dancing figure, and to have been, therefore, such an education to watch.

It was far harder for the performers than for the audience. A leading dancer with Rambert once told me impatiently that she felt bored by dancing Cunningham, it felt like assembling furniture from instructions. Even one of Cunningham’s greatest interpreters, Carolyn Brown, said she made up stories with her colleagues to get them through tricky sections of choreography - maidens washing at the well, for example, she said wryly.

Making the dance mean something else was anathema to the choreographer himself, but that had nothing to do with jettisoning the sense of theatre in his dances. His first two teachers, Mrs Maude Barrett and Miss Nellie Cornish, were women of vivid and full-frontal stage personality. Mrs Barrett would astonish the parents of wee Mercier and his classmates at the end-of-term show by strapping down her full skirts and doing headstands, or popping up onto a horse and twirling Indian clubs. Cunningham told a Daily Telegraph interviewer: “Mrs Barrett left me with the indelible impression that comes, every time I go to the theatre, that I may experience or see something I have never known before.”

Miss Cornish, who ran the influential Cornish School in Seattle (now Cornish College of the Arts), had the idea, Cunningham later related approvingly, “that if you were going to work in one art, you should know about the others.” And it’s significant that Cunningham joined originally on the drama course before starting to take dance too

Cunningham, joined originally on the grand tour, before starting to take dance too.

The third grand diva to mark Cunningham was Martha Graham, the grandest theatrical of them all, who hired the 20-year-old as only the second man to be allowed into her sacred company. His satyr's face and spectacular physical dynamism fed Graham's 1940s masterpieces, emotional triangles with herself and her statuesque lover Erick Hawkins counterweighed by Cunningham's Puckish presence.

Even if Cunningham's own dances seem the polar reaction to Graham's, I'd say that they are no less technicoloured. He scrubbed habitual motivation and relationship out of movement by creating dance through the antiseptic eyes of cameras and computers, and yes, these did produce an abnormal, unprecedented new palette of movements. Yet with those airy not-quite-human skitterings, unrelated arrivals and sudden stops, you felt tuned in a different way to nature, to the human being as an animal among other life forms, or timeless silence.

"I would not call it a battleground between me and the dancers, but it was initially difficult," admitted Cunningham. Not just the technical aspect; his obstinacy also made it vastly difficult for them to win stable financial backing, and legion are the stories of freezing, underfed dancers tramping the highways with their peculiarly dogged master, followed by a pack of hostile critics. Sometimes in hicksville they got better reactions: after one performance in a sparsely attended village hall, a man told them testily, "Glad we had you. Usually they bring us piano concerts, and all we are is entertained."

And now we won't be able to go again to Cunningham's company and be more-than-entertained, unless it is booked here within the two years' countdown to closure that his death sets off. Those gloriously diamond-cut, soft-footed works will go on being performed, learned carefully by other companies like Petipa or Balanchine masterworks - but sealed now like gorgeous timepieces in glass cases, for us to marvel at their unique, increasingly occluded complexity. No longer ticking away real time, with the old master flicking his dice in the wings determined to give us all a surprise.

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