

# Democracy in Action, That's Cunningham

Merce Cunningham turned 88 on Monday. In recent years he has routinely been described as the world's greatest choreographer. This doesn't mean, though, that he is just the oldest

**ALASTAIR  
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**DANCE**

choreographer who has been great in the past. The dances he has made this millennium suggest, amazingly, that no choreographer alive is more concerned with continuing to extend his range. (I have heard dancers who appeared in his work from the 1950s to the '90s speak with awe of the new complexities that have opened up in his recent work.) He is the only choreographer I can think of who has presented at least one true masterpiece — the world-conquering "Biped" (1999) — after his 80th birthday.

But his choreography, whose most famous (or notorious) feature is its independence from its music, is still difficult for many audiences. It's rare to attend a performance of his work without someone walking out. Sometimes people do it in droves. When Mr. Cunningham was just 70, in 1989, I remember one New York dancegoer exclaiming, "He's all the

At 88, still a member  
in good standing  
of the avant-garde.

avant-garde we have left." Today his work, even those time-honored dances from the 1950s and '60s that everyone knows are historic, still feels to me far more avant-garde than that of any other artist I know, and invaluable so. I've never seen a Cunningham dance that hasn't rewarded a second viewing.

New York is not the city that made him internationally famous; that was London, where his one-week debut season in 1964 took off and became a monthlong phenomenon. And New York is not (not by a long way) the city in which he is most acclaimed; that prize surely goes to Paris, where it is not unusual to be accosted for extra tickets to his performances even before reaching street level on your way out of the Métro. But it's New York where he lives, and works, and it's New York

that has consistently inspired him.

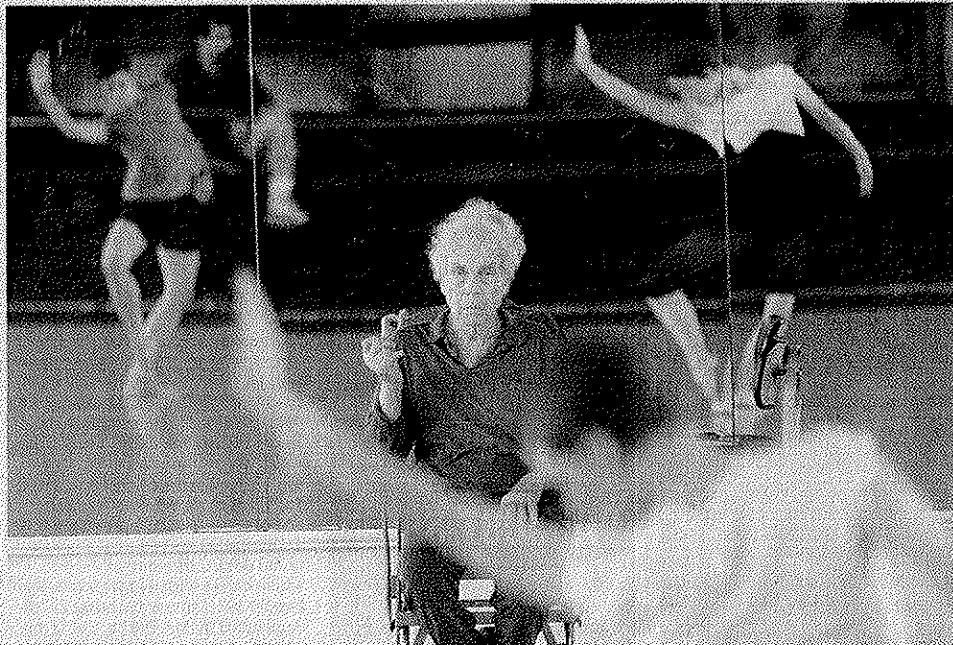
In 1954, when he was choreographing "Minutiae" (his first dance to feature décor by Robert Rauschenberg), one of his dancers asked him, "What's this about?" He took her to the open window, showed her the street below and said, "That!" I assume what he meant was what he has often showed onstage: three or more busy people doing different movements at the same time without bumping into one another or even referring to one another, an image of everyday democracy in action, a peaceable kingdom of diverse human beings carrying on regardless.

In his company's studio at the Westbeth artists' complex in the West Village, with its marvelous views over Manhattan and across the Hudson, he and colleagues are currently presenting a sporadic series of evenings titled "History Matters" for invited audiences (ranging from students to ex-dancers and longtime aficionados), in which excerpts from older works, danced by a mixture of his company's dancers and apprentices, are introduced and followed by panel discussions.

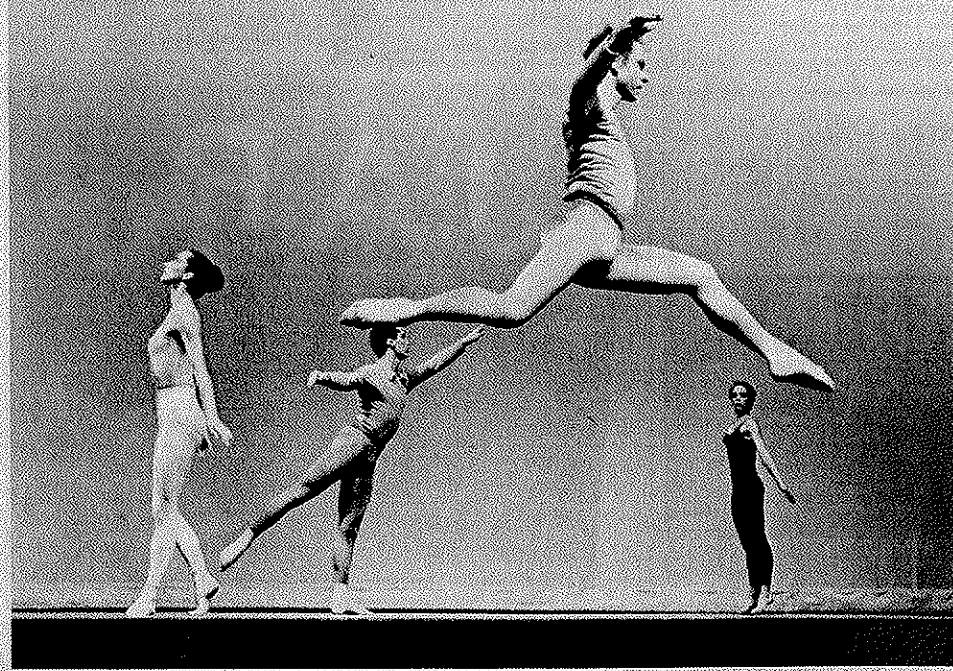
On Tuesday I caught a "History Matters" program covering a cross-section of five Cunningham dances from 1944 to 1960. (The intention had been to end with the 1959 "Rune," but a dancer's injury led, on short notice, to this being replaced, brilliantly, by a duet from the 1960 "Crises.") The next program (no date has been announced) will focus on the 1960s.

Though none of these could have been by any other dance maker, and though all showed the clear formation of the form of dance theater he has elaborated ever since, it was startling to see how each had singular features that Mr. Cunningham seems never to have re-employed. Often what's distinctive occurs at the basic level of dance vocabulary. One of the supreme step-makers of all time, he delights in splicing one known step onto another to come up with something unprecedented.

His 1944 solo "Totem Ancestor" shows, unforgettably, the sudden jumps from kneeling and crouched positions he found he could do in his own dance prime. (The dancer looks as if his arched-back torso is pulling him up into the air, with his feet still tucked under.) But his 1950s dances show how he applied this instinct to dances for others, sometimes grafting modern-dance features onto bal-



Jeffrey A. Sutter/The New York Times



Mervin Silver/Cunningham Dance Foundation

Merce Cunningham, left, watching his dancers rehearse in 1999; bottom, Cunningham dancers performing "Suite for Five" in 1963.

let, sometimes combining two different ballet movements into a new one.

The quintet from "Suite for Five" (1955), though characterized by steps both ebullient and elongated, is a dazzling New York street view of Cunningham coexistence. These five dancers make the peripheries of the stage as striking as its central zone or its diagonals, each of them engaged in his or her own individual vocabulary, own spiritual world, until, now and then, Mr. Cunningham brings two or three of them together suddenly in briefly Mozartian harmony, out of the blue sharing the same direction and the same step for a while, before diverging once more.

Looking at "Septet" (1953), "Suite for Five" (1955), "Summerspace" (1958) and "Crises" (1960), I see that Mr. Cunningham was already exemplifying the expressive ambiguities and non sequiturs that in spoken drama were taken up in this era by Beckett, Ionesco and Harold Pinter, then called the Theater of the Absurd. Nowhere are these more enthralling than in his dance duets.

In "Septet" the woman is statuesque, inscrutable; the man shapes, tilts, reshapes and lifts her, and yet nothing is more memorable than the moment when, supporting her hip with one hand as she balances on half-toe, he slowly kneels while looking up at her in something like awe. In "Suite for Five" the duet keeps splitting into two solos, with the woman absolutely doing her own thing, except, again, that his regard keeps telling us that she is on his mind. And in the opening duet of "Crises," the woman is driven, wracked, convulsed but almost never concerned with the man except that he keeps coming into her orbit, tracking her. Is he trying to control her? Or to save her from herself? The mystery is part of the drama. If people ask why Mr. Cunningham is called "greatest," they should see these duets for starters.

#### ONLINE: IN MOTION

The work of Merce Cunningham over the years, in pictures: [nytimes.com/arts](http://nytimes.com/arts)