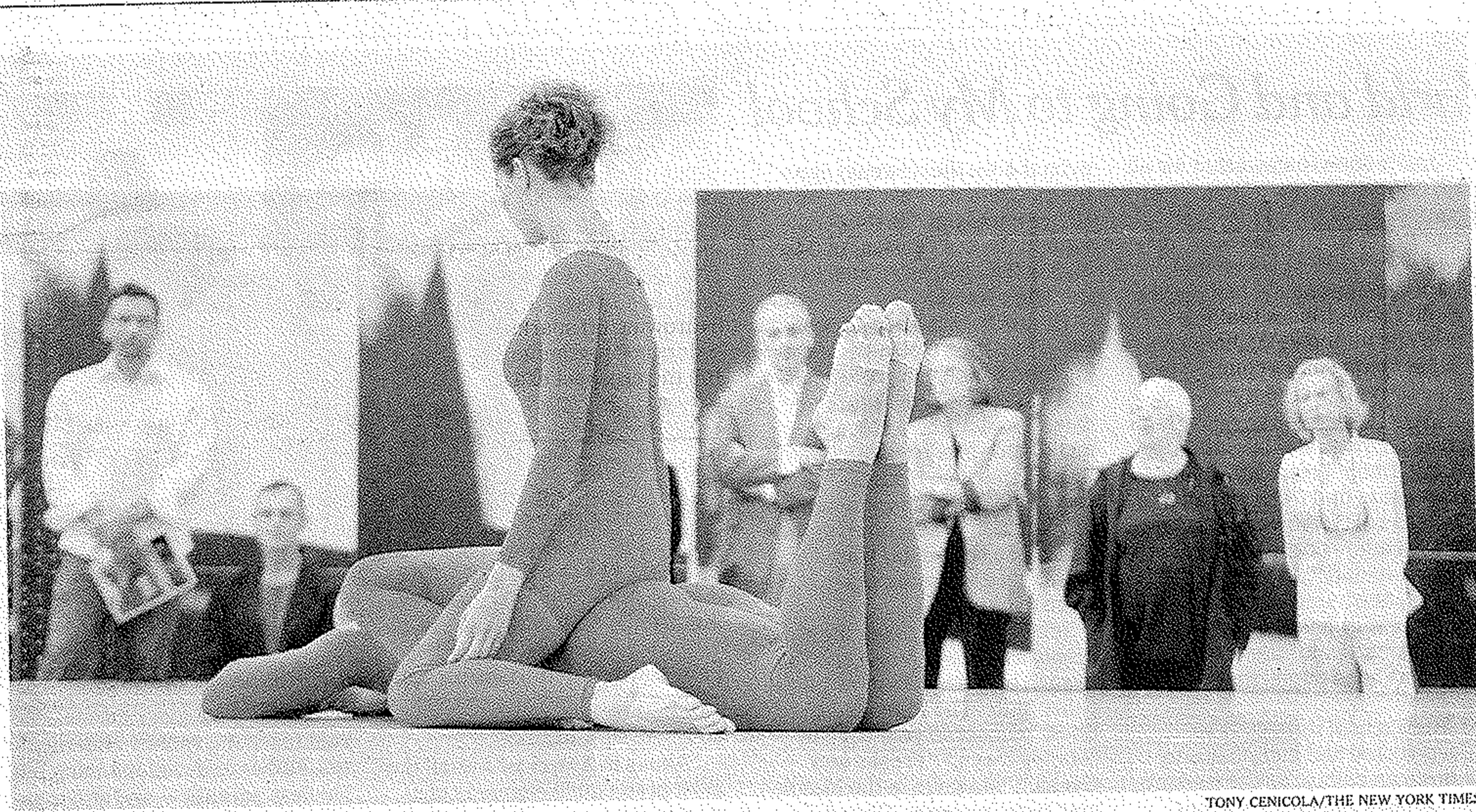


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TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Dia:Beacon, where Cunningham Events were staged over the weekend.

One Stage for Each Eye, and Plenty for the Ears Too

BEACON, N.Y., Sept. 29 — Paul Valéry wrote in “L’Âme et la Danse” (1921) that the essence of dance lay in metamorphosis, that what dance shows is the constant

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DANCE
REVIEW

change of one physical image into another. His point works for all dance, but to no choreographer can it apply more fully than Merce Cunningham. Change is the continual condition of his dance theater, and not just of one image, shape or rhythm into another.

In his Events this weekend at Dia:Beacon here, the Cunningham dancers performed on two square, raised stages connected at one corner. In two brief episodes Saturday the split-focus spectacle was of simultaneous solos, one on each stage, and if you tried to keep an eye on both, the interest was to see how similar or different they were. When Rashawn Mitchell and Daniel Madoff (opposite in looks), on separate stages, performed briskly step-laden and multidirectional new solos from Mr. Cunningham’s forthcoming “XOVER” (which has its premiere on Friday at Dartmouth College), the fun lay in how nearly identical their material was, although there were fractional differences in timing and drastic differences in focus. When Holley Farmer, an intense redhead, danced on one stage and Andrea Weber, a twinkling blonde, on the other, their solos

were altogether unlike, but a harmony — like left and right hands of the same piano part — developed nonetheless.

Yet Mr. Cunningham, like a filmmaker cutting to a new scene, promptly replaced soloists with duets or ensembles, again and again. You singled out Mr. Mitchell as a star because of the lyrical fluency with which he tackled the off-balance challenges of one dance, only to notice him in the back row of a staccato unison group later. Nothing was con-

A lively invitation to compare and contrast.

stant but change. The coolly alert Koji Mizuta lowered Ms. Farmer into a diagonal line, her face and chest addressing the floor for a long while. This looked dramatically suspenseful, and you wondered what would happen next, but it wasn’t anything you could have predicted. He raised her back to standing, ran across to the other stage and joined a completely different dance.

In 1999 Alan Ayckbourn wrote a pair of plays, “House” and “Garden,” to be performed simultaneously in adjacent theaters, with the same characters in the same day adding up to quite dif-

Merce Cunningham

Dia:Beacon

ferent plays and the actors rushing from their exits in one theater to their entrances in another. Imagine the plotless dance equivalent and you have an idea of these Dia:Beacon Events. True, audience members could position themselves to watch both stages at the same time, but the left-right/foreground-background contrast was such that nobody could concentrate on both consistently.

The setting was one of the spacious Riggio Galleries, and on Saturday afternoon the natural overhead light was a particular pleasure. The costumes, by Anna Finke, in shades of russet, dramatized the colors in the surrounding suite of paintings on the gallery’s white walls. The musicians — David Behrman, John King, Takehisa Kosugi and Christian Wolff — created a polyphonic aural environment in which sound itself traveled around the space.

Any Cunningham Event is an anthology of dance from repertory made over the decades; I presume that Mr. Cunningham enjoys arranging the material so that not even aficionados will be able to identify it all without private information. On Saturday I found myself ravished by a duet for Lisa Boudreau and Brandon Collwes that seemed wholly new to me until I realized I had seen

and admired it many times in Mr. Cunningham’s magnum opus, “Interscape” (2000), and always with Ms. Boudreau. The difference was that this time I was watching it from behind, so to speak, and near at hand, so I spotted a fresh wealth of luxurious detail, like Ms. Boudreau’s very slow descents from half-toe to flat foot and the lusciously gradual archings-back of her head and upper spine before she allowed herself to fall back into Mr. Collwes’s arms.

This was an inaugural performance of what is being called MCDC’s Hudson Valley Project, and it was dedicated to Harvey Lichtenstein and Bénédicte Pésle, figures whose ardent promotion of work by Mr. Cunningham and other artists began in the 1960s. (The Merce Cunningham Dance Company is expected to perform a series of further Events at Dia:Beacon during the next two years.)

I write this before attending the second performance, on Sunday, at which I am sure to see much I missed the first time. “My spirit impels me to speak of bodies changed into new forms” are the words with which Ovid starts his “Metamorphoses,” a good motto for all dance-goers and for Cunningham-viewers in particular. You have to be there at the moment to enjoy what’s before your eyes, knowing that in the next it will have been replaced by something else.