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Merce Cunningham at the Barbican



Debra Craine



With each passing year, visits by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, with the choreographer himself at the helm, become ever more precious. The grandfather of American modern dance is now 89, frail and confined to a wheelchair, but here he was taking a curtain call on the opening night of this year's Dance Umbrella festival.

There is no one quite like Cunningham, who has spent more than 50 years creating dances of uncompromising rigour, works so pure in concept and pristine in execution that they can take your breath away. This week-long Barbican season showcases his indomitable creative spirit. The relentless vigour of his choreography and its refusal to follow any kind of fashion — except the one that it has created — are astonishing.

Crises (1960) posits Cunningham's fundamental premise, that music and dance don't need to speak to each other. If they do find harmony together in one of his works it's serendipitous; if they don't it's irrelevant. *Crises* co-exists (for that is the right word) with Conlon Nancarrow's garrulous studies for player piano. The five dancers move in randomly etched private bubbles, their little steps quickening like a rapid pulse, their balances sighing like a deep exhalation. The strength and control that the choreography demands are awe-inspiring.

XOVER (2007) is a tribute to two of Cunningham's most significant collaborators, the artist Robert Rauschenberg (who died earlier this year) and the composer John Cage, whose 1958 compositions *Aria* and *Fontana Mix* are here paired in live performance.

Cage's panoply of sounds ranges from duck calls to human growls (amazing vocal performance by Joan La Barbara), while the choreography (made, like all Cunningham's recent work, with the aid of a computer programme) is so tautly formed that every muscle twitch counts for something. At one point the dance flows into a majestically languorous duet, one of those unexpected and delicious moments that pepper Cunningham's cerebral explorations.

BIPED (1999), which ends programme one, glows with elegance and mystery, inspired to greatness by Gavin Bryars's ravishingly lush score (played live to gorgeous effect) and Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser's innovative stage setting. The latter effectively places the 13 dancers inside what feels like a giant computer, their performance existing side-by-side with digitally-generated outlines of dancers in motion.

The curious trajectories and unlikely alignments of Cunningham's choreography seem driven by a unity of purpose he claims not to possess, and the whole feels uncharacteristically romantic. It's beautiful, captivating, uplifting — a work of genius by a genius.

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