

THE AGE

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Masterful brush strokes of dance

DANCE

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY PROGRAM A

At the State Theatre, Arts Centre, October 24-25. Running time: 150 minutes
Hilary Crampton Reviewer

WATCHING *Suite for Five*, first presented in the late 1950s, is like watching a master calligrapher. One sees each action, unfolding like brush strokes on a scroll. It is spare, clean movement, exposing Cunningham's detailed exploration of the body's architecture and its movement capabilities. The foundation is the up-down, side-to-side, forward-and-back dimensions familiar from ballet, but he fills in the spaces between, the diagonals, curves, long lines and compact shapes. John Cage's equally spare exploration of the piano in his *Music for Piano 4-19* occurs parallel to the action. Robert Rauschenberg's unitards, each dancer in a different colour, reinforce the sense of paint strokes.

The dancers render the action with stunning clarity. They are strong and muscular, capable of astonishing vertical jumps from a deep crouch or sustained balances as spines unfold, vertebra by vertebra. It is as if every cell is charged with pulsating energy, no detail missing.

For *eyeSpace* we had to switch



The Merce Cunningham Dance Company perform *BIPED*. PICTURE: JOHN WOULDSTRA

on and tune in, iPods at the ready, to a shuffle of tunes from Mikel Rouse's *International Cloud Atlas*, another device to undercut the assumed reliance of dance upon the music. Designer Daniel Arsham dressed the dancers in steely grey gleaming unitards against his intriguing set piece that employed the deceptive perspective of an Escher drawing. Despite the cocooning effect of the iPods, a concurrent soundscape — announcements from the New York subway, crashing doors, the roaring of trains — intruded. The result was a kind of disorientation from multi-

directional stimuli, implying the hurly-burly of a rushing metropolis.

In *BIPED*, the dancers perform behind a hazy scrim across which digital images designed by Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser sweep and tumble, in a delicate tracery of captured dance motion that dwarfs the dancers. At one point the dancers don sheer coats and trousers over their sleek, metallic body-clinging outfits. These trail and float behind them, while Cunningham switches from arrow-straight trajectories to meandering pathways in a subtle and beautiful diffusion of the action.

Despite Cunningham's denial of the need for dance to be reliant upon the music, he nevertheless embraces its role as partner. The performance was accompanied by live acoustic and electronic music superbly played by Christian Wolff, Stephan Moore, Josephine Vains, Takehisa Kosugi and John King.

Cunningham's work demands commitment from the audience, a willingness to hang in there to discern the detail or enjoy the overall play of action. For some it proved too much, but the show's standing ovation indicated most found it worth the effort.

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