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THE GREAT OUTDOORS: UC Irvine dancers perform "Playground MinEvent" in the plaza between Segerstrom Hall and the new Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall.

FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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## Exploring space

### **The Cunningham Dance Company ushers in a brave new way to watch dance – all over the Orange County Performing Arts Center.**

By LAURA BLEIBERG  
The Orange County Register

Saturday night's Merce Cunningham dance concert at the Orange County Performing Arts Center was about as close to a 1960s "happening" as you never thought you'd witness behind the Orange curtain.

The big difference between 1967 and 2007? Not hairstyles – it's technology. It was integral to Saturday's experience with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and some of us needed handholding to keep it all straight.

iPod? Check.

iPod instructions? Check.

Ushers herding us from one venue to the next? Yes, too vigorously, actually.

Sweater for the outdoor movie? Glasses? All prepared.

It now must be obvious that this was no ordinary night, and we owe center officials a "thank you" for that. The fancy new architecture and the wind-swept plaza would amount to little if the art presented there failed to make good on the promise implicit in the "center" name. The Cunningham concert signaled a step toward truly engaging the entire community.

But what of the show? It unfolded in four distinct parts, beginning in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall with a Cunningham "MinEvent," a specially commissioned dance made for an unusual dance space. The concert hall constituted such a site because of its smaller, irregularly shaped stage, lack of wing space and so on.

This "MinEvent" – like the other "events" that Cunningham has made over the decades in places such as Manhattan's Grand Central Terminal – was a collage of passages from previous works. Since Cunningham's dance phrases are interchangeable, such mix-and-match dances are not only possible, but part of his philosophy of dance.

The 36-minute piece was visually engaging and bold. Percussionist William Winant and Michael Dauphinais on electric violin stood upstage and provided minimalist sounds. The 14 dancers made a dramatic entrance, coming on one by one from alternating sides, and finishing in a giant V shape. That pose dissolved into the controlled chaos of human pointillism, with dancers confined to a circular place. Each performed the same steps, but executed them on differing beats. Dancers were oriented on various axes. It conjured a picture of atoms buzzing.

Small-group sections dominated the rest of the work. Dancer Julie Cunningham (no connection to the choreographer) stood confidently still with a leg at a 90-degree angle above the stage, held achingly long. Three men mimed playing the children's game jacks (taken from 1973's "Un Jour ou Deux"). Another favorite part featured clumps of dancers jumping along a horizontal line, and holding their bodies in the direction of the thrust. Petite Andrea Weber had a playful solo of balances on a high half-point. Her impish stage presence had the impact of an additional onstage light. Then, with the rustle of brushed bare feet against the floor, everyone zoomed back onstage for a vigorous conclusion. Cunningham sat unobtrusively on the right, watching the proceedings.

The concert hall made a surprisingly terrific locale. Its intimacy compensated for imperfect sight lines. The visual warmth of the interior complemented lighting designer Megan Byrne's subtle tonal shifts. And Cunningham's dances benefit from close-up viewing.

The audience then was escorted through one exit only to a carpeted square on the plaza, from which we were invited to watch Elliot Caplan's 1991 film of "Beach Birds for Camera." It looked quite smart, projected on the wall of the original Segerstrom Hall. Musicians played pianos and tilted rain sticks. It was a casual scene, however, with patrons talking and ushers shouting, "You want to get your iPod before you go into Segerstrom Hall!" Only a few dozen hardy souls stayed for the credits.

Finally, on to "eyeSpace," a dance with iPods. In the pit were Mikel Rouse, composer of the dance's score, "International Cloud Atlas Music," and Stephan Moore, who briefly explained how to use the personal music listening devices. With the synchronizing cry, "Gentleman, start your iPods," – just joking – it began.

This viewer discovered immediately that I cannot listen to two soundtracks simultaneously and fully absorb a dance. Rouse and Moore manipulated a soundscape from the pit that could be heard even with the iPod on. It made for aural overload. Even when I took off the headphones, I had difficulty getting my visual bearings.

Adding to the difficulty, "eyeSpace" was a small work, composed for the Joyce Theatre in New York, which is at least one-third the size of Segerstrom Hall. The dancers looked far, far away. The trios and quartets resembled a speeded-up silent movie. To make matters worse, Henry Samelson's brightly colored backdrop overwhelmed the human presence. By the time I could focus, dancers Julie Cunningham and Daniel Squire were concluding a catch-me-if-you-can duet near the piece's end. Curtain down, and it was over. Can I see that one again?

Sorry, no. Now it was back outside to return the iPods and catch glimpses of dancers from UCI performing their own Cunningham "MinEvent" on the outdoor plaza. Other university students (Cal State Fullerton and Chapman University) created visual projections on the wall and played music for the dancers.

It was a full evening. "Just a normal night at the Performing Arts Center," its president, Terry Dwyer, quipped as we happened past him. Let's hope so.

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