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DANCE

Merce Cunningham's playful experiments

Merce Cunningham brings a new dance, and a thousand iPods, to Orange County.

By Susan Josephs
Special to The Times

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Back in the mid-'50s, when he faced both financial woes and the snobbery of the New York dance establishment, choreographer Merce Cunningham started taking his fledgling troupe on the road for "one-night stands" at any venue he could book. In a VW bus bought with borrowed money, "we used to travel great distances. After all, performing for one night was better than nothing," he says with a chuckle.

Speaking by phone from his New York studio, the 88-year-old Cunningham — now a modern dance icon — admits to fond memories of those days. "I remember a great deal of laughter, no matter how difficult it was," he says.

Half a century later, that sheer zest for putting on a show has not abated, as spectators at the Orange County Performing Arts Center are due to find out tonight. Far from re-creating yesterday's masterpieces, Cunningham's dancers will perform a new work, with a score composed for iPods programmed to "shuffle," and another piece devised especially for the center's Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall.

Tonight will, in fact, mark the first time that Cunningham's company performs in multiple sites in the course of one night, while OCPAC will set a new artistic precedent not only in utilizing most of its venues for one presentation but also by having commissioned a site-specific dance for the newest of them.

Seeking the antithesis "of the canned performance, where we're just one stop among 30 cities, we wanted to create a living, breathing event designed specifically for the center," says Aaron Egigian, OCPAC's senior director of music programming. "We also felt that Merce is one of the leading if not the greatest choreographer of the last 50 years, and we were thrilled at his willingness to create something this unique."

"Think of it as a taster's Merce," says Robert Swinston, a longtime Cunningham dancer and assistant to the choreographer who has spent the better part of a lifetime championing the singular aesthetic philosophy he developed with his creative and life partner, the late composer John Cage: Although dancing and music may occur simultaneously, neither has to be in sync with the other.

Tonight's show is to begin with a talk by Columbia College Chicago dance professor Bonnie Brooks on how to watch a Cunningham performance and end with UC Irvine students performing a Cunningham dance, "Playground," in the center's Community Arts Plaza, complete with audiovisual effects supplied by Chapman University and Cal State Fullerton students. In between, the audience will watch the work that Cunningham created for the 2,000-seat Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, migrate over to the plaza where the Cunningham dance film "Beach Birds for Camera" will be shown to live music and, with iPods in hand (more on those later), wind up in the older, 3,000-seat Segerstrom Hall for the Southern California premiere of "eyeSpace."

For neophyte viewers of Cunningham's narrative-free, musically independent dances, Swinston advises, "Approach them like paintings in a museum, where you're not trying to sum up what you're experiencing, you're simply moving from painting to painting."

Take Cunningham's latest site-specific work. Called "MinEvent," the 37-minute dance will be performed in Segerstrom Concert Hall by the entire 14-member company and culled from works in Cunningham's repertory dating from 1967 to 2003. It is the most recent in a long line of collage-like works that Cunningham has created, beginning with a dance for a Vienna museum in 1964. Since then, these pieces, all called "Events" or "MinEvents," depending on length, have been performed in, to name just three locations, Grand Central Station, the Piazza San Marco in Venice and a beach in Australia.

Working with photographs of the new hall for guidance, Cunningham chose movement sequences "for a space that was built for music. I always say yes instead of no," he says, both jocular and cryptic when asked about any choreographic challenges he might have faced. The hall's stage floor, for example, was designed for orchestras, not dancers. "But in these cases, I do have to be practical because of architecture. I always create a continuity of movement that reflects the circumstances of the space."

In the case of "eyeSpace," which premiered at the Joyce Theater in New York last fall, Cunningham essentially created a variation on one of his favorite themes: variation. The work has two choreographic versions — one shorter than the other, both filled with balancing and twisting movements — and four musical versions, including a wildly eclectic score by composer Mikel Rouse called "International Cloud Atlas." Designed to be listened to in iPod's shuffle mode, Rouse's music contains rock vocals, bossa nova rhythms, street noises and more.

When performing to this score (the shorter version), as it will at OCPAC, the company brings along about a thousand iPods to lend to audience members, "so each person has their own version of the score," says Rouse. "It's the Cage and Cunningham aesthetic on steroids."

Like all composers who have collaborated with Cunningham, Rouse composed "International Cloud Atlas" without taking the choreography into account.

"It allowed me to do things rhythmically and lyrically that can be very hard to pull off when composing for modern dance," he says.

"When you're working with Merce, you're told the length of the dance and that's it."

Additionally, Rouse, together with the dance company's audio specialist, Stephan Moore, will perform a live version of the score during the performance and create even more options for taking in the whole.

"We're challenging the audience to have a public and private experience at the same time," says Rouse.

"Giving someone that much control over the performance can be wonderful and freeing or very restrictive, depending on the person."

To this day, the Cage and Cunningham principle of separating the music from the dance can still divide audiences. And when asked whether dancers new to the company have difficulty learning how not to dance to music, Swinston sighs with the fatigue of someone who's had to explain the same idea over and over.

"People have this romantic idea that everything has to go with music — and it doesn't," he says. "Cunningham dancers move to the rhythm of the steps. It's similar to the way people might watch TV with the sound turned off and playing the radio or something else."

Like all of Cunningham's choreography from the early 1990s onward, "eyeSpace" began on the computer.

Using the software now known as DanceForms, the choreographer continues to employ his longtime method of chance procedures — determining the order of movements by random means, such as the flip of a coin. But he can also "more or less enter a phrase of movement [into the computer] and see if it will work," he says. "You can change the tempo and all the spatial aspects before you take it to the dancers."

Though now largely confined to a wheelchair, Cunningham still teaches the advanced technique class at his studio twice a week, in addition to constantly working on new choreography. He also draws every day, mostly sketches of animals, "as a way of putting my mind on something else."

"I can't move much, but I can still twiddle my feet," he says. "To my dancers, I will attempt to show whatever I can and explain the rest. I don't enjoy talking, but I do it."

"He'll sit on a stool in front of the barre, and he still has this intensity that makes the dancers move," says Swinston. "He's much gentler now as an older man, but he still challenges you like no one else does. He's like a magician, the way he can keep creating new ways of doing."

These "endless possibilities" of movement are precisely why Cunningham persisted with his work in those early days of struggle and why he also has never believed in retirement.

"I strongly believe that any kind of work is the only thing that keeps one going," he says.

"I always felt strongly about the ideas that I was dealing with, that they had a real value."

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Merce Cunningham Dance Company

Where: Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

When: 8 tonight (lecture at 7 p.m.)

Price: \$38 to \$66

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