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DANCE REVIEW

Merce Cunningham, the mix master

The night belongs to Merce Cunningham's dazzling multimedia, multivenue program in Orange County.

By Chris Pasles
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For a few hours Saturday, the Orange County Performing Arts Center became one of the hippest places around. That's because the Merce Cunningham Dance Company took over the site, performing in three locations — the new Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, the Community Arts Plaza (on film) and the older Segerstrom Hall.

The program was also a first for the 88-year-old Cunningham. Never before had his company, founded in 1953, performed in multiple sites in a single evening.

A preconcert lecture on the Cunningham aesthetic packed the 500-seat Samueli Theater — yet another OCPAC venue — to the rafters, and a post-concert performance in the plaza by UC Irvine dance students, with audiovisuals by Chapman University and Cal State Fullerton, prolonged the innovative choreographer's vision.

There were jam-ups at the doors; confusion about when to turn on iPods for the West Coast premiere of one of the works, "eyeSpace," whose score was designed to be listened to in the portable music players' shuffle mode; loads of young students mixing with older arts patrons; and, perhaps surprisingly, relatively few defections. It was wonderful.

Taking a cue from Cunningham's chance techniques, in which sequences of events are determined by rolls of the dice or tosses of coins, Columbia College Chicago professor Bonnie Brooks began her talk on how to watch a Cunningham performance by randomly choosing among a number of possible talking points and landing on the least auspicious of three "exit strategies": Just leave.

But before her talk was over, she had given plenty of reasons to stay.

The program began with a 37-minute "MinEvent," a new collage drawn from eight dances choreographed between 1967 and 2003 (including "An Jour," "Four Lifts," "Installations" and "Way Station").

Created for OCPAC, this work was danced in the new concert hall, where presumably the floor was unmarred by the splinters, broken planks and exposed nails of floors the troupe danced on during its early years, as chronicled in former company member Carolyn Brown's new book, "Chance and Circumstance."

Dressed in deep blue bodysuits, the 14 dancers entered one by one, linked hands in a V-chain, then progressed through a series of challenging and varied duets, solos and ensembles to end with an unexpectedly audience-friendly grand presentation to the front. The music was improvised by violinist Michael Dauphinais and percussionist William Winant, as filtered through John King's computer.

Cunningham's dance film "Beach Birds for Camera" was next, projected in the plaza on a towering granite wall of Segerstrom Hall. While John Cage's score "Four Cubed" was performed live by King, Dauphinais, Winant and Stephan Moore, some people chattered and complained that they could hear nothing through their iPods (they were tuning in for the wrong dance) and eventually wandered away to avoid the crush at the doors for the last piece.

Too bad. The 25-minute film proved magical as the larger-than-life dancers seemed to occupy various uncanny dimensions on the wall's grainy stone surface. When the film shifted from black and white to color, the shock was breathtaking.

Still, "eyeSpace" was the most intriguing event of the evening, with everyone potentially hearing a unique sequence of Mikel Rouse's score, "International Cloud Atlas," a mix of music, sound effects and spoken word — which in addition was played live.

The dance began with a quiet, reflective quartet that yielded to increasingly animated sequences of precise, intricate, off-balance duets, trios and ensembles. Yet this formidable, abstract work concluded unexpectedly with a charming duet by Julie Cunningham (no relation) and Daniel Squire.

Here, the two seemed to be simply giddy young lovers — quickly, shyly swinging their arms to touch each other and goofily bobbing their heads front and sideways as if they could barely contain their joy in each other's response. Has Merce mellowed in recent years?

Others may have seen the ending in another way. Admittedly, trying to describe, much less critique, a Cunningham dance is like venturing to explain the inner operations of a computer.

But few choreographers give viewers so much license to react and interpret freely, so who's to say who's wrong?

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