

## Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Richmond, California

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Published: November 11 2008 22:59 | Last updated: November 11 2008 22:59

If you are Merce Cunningham, almost no environment is hostile to the creation of dances that are at once austere and lustrous, primal and complex. Last Sunday found the illustrious choreographer, now 89 and wheelchair-bound, leading the revels at northern California's Ford Point. Designed in 1930 by the industrial architect Albert Kahn, this erstwhile car plant boasts an enviable space – a craneway pavilion that soars 65 feet to its skylights and commands, on three sides, a heartstopping view of San Francisco Bay.



As the late autumn California sunlight glistened off the water and bathed the 14 dancers of the Cunningham company, they leapt, arched, rolled, rested, cantered and gambolled on three interconnected stages. New and existing material was melded into the inimitable diversions that, long ago, shattered conventional thinking about dance and how it is structured. The episodes proceed with a discontinuity that forces us to savour every moment for nothing but the intrinsic beauty of the body in motion and in repose. As Cunningham's

musical team filled the space with the electronic squeals, scrapes, buzzes and groans that define one species of modernism, visitors strolling through the hall became the masters of their perceptual destinies, determining where and when their eyes would rest on the spectacle.

Cunningham unfurled this *Craneway Event* (pictured above) midway through a two-week residency at the University of California that consummates a unique artistic relationship. The company first visited the campus 46 years ago, when the troupe consisted of Cunningham, five other dancers and the musicians John Cage and David Tudor. Since then, the organisation has returned on 23 occasions, and virtually every appearance marked a milestone in the company's long history.

It was in Berkeley nine years ago that Cunningham unveiled his sensuous *Biped*. The work's revival last week, in a superb traversal, summons, through projections of computer-generated images of dancers at work, a world of fleeting epiphanies. Garbed like silvery gladiators, participants emerge from the abyss, flirt with their shadowy facsimiles and retreat into the void, while Gavin Bryars' score broods magnificently.

*Suite for Five* highlighted the 1962 Berkeley tour, but it wasn't sentimentality that prompted its revival last week. With the stunning Daniel Madoff taking up the choreographer's original assignment and the cool, magisterial Holley Farmer reincarnating Carolyn Brown, the piece strikes one as quintessential Cunningham, from its demanding lunges, stretches and hops to its burbling Cage score for prepared piano. The return of the 1970 *Second Hand* found Robert Swinston, decked out, like Cunningham before him, in Jasper Johns' elegant costume, conjuring feats of exquisite skill from these dancers.

The Berkeley residency includes the standard colloquia, interviews and film showings, and dance that honours Cunningham's halcyon days as reinterpreted by the children of this multimedia age. A fitting tribute to a master who, on the cusp of his 10th decade, still looks like the youngest choreographer around.

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