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Dance hits rock bottom with unique setting of 'Ocean'

by [Euan Kerr](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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Waite Park, Minn. — If you are a modern dance lover, the place to be this weekend is the bottom of a quarry in central Minnesota. Thousands of people will travel to St. Cloud to see the Merce Cunningham Dance Company perform "Ocean" on a specially-constructed stage, 150-feet below ground level.

Getting to the performance site in Martin Marietta's Rainbow Quarry is an effort in itself. For safety you can only go in by bus, including the audience.

Today it's driven by the Walker Art Center's Doug Benidt.

"Martin Marietta the people that own the quarry built this road for us," says Benidt. "They made the parking lot for us. They redid the fencing. They rebuilt these roads so we can get all the buses in and out."

The road spirals down into the quarry pit. From the top the blue roof above the stage and the surrounding seats look tiny, dwarfed by the huge granite walls. This is called the Rainbow Quarry because of the seams of different colored rock. "Ocean" will be performed at sunset so arriving audiences can watch the walls change color in the dying light.

At the bottom, stage hands are putting finishing touches to the bleachers which will seat 1,500 people. Mike Reinert is the site manager for Martin Marietta. He says the company closed down this pit for two months to prepare for Ocean.

"There was over a million tons of rock removed out of here so they could get a platform, if you will, to work with," he says.

Reinert has been with the Ocean project since the start. He says when the idea was first suggested it was something outside the quarry's experience.

"I gotta tell you," he says, "I don't think any of us realized what a big deal this was going to be until the closer we got to it. You gotta understand that we're not, I'm not versed in the arts. I mean I'm just not."

That's changing of course, and there's a lot to learn.

"Ocean" is the result of a collaboration of two modernist greats, composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham. It was Cage who first suggested doing a piece in the round back in the late 1980s. He had a vision of dancers on a circular stage surrounded by an audience, which in turn was surrounded by an orchestra of 150 musicians. The idea was to bathe the audience in sound.

Cunningham now says he immediately said yes, even though he didn't know what 'in the round' meant. As he soon found out, for a choreographer, it means a whole new dimension.

"Because ordinarily with a conventional stage the focus is front and center, and with something in the round it's all focus or there is no focus," Cunningham says.

Having an audience all round gives different and larger significance to the dancer's movements.

Merce Cunningham, who is nearly 90 now, began his career in the 1940s with Martha Graham.

He's always delighted in challenge and Cunningham approached "Ocean" as he had many other pieces by allowing chance to guide him. He created sets of movements and then rolled dice to put them in sequence. He says it took thousands of these "chance operations" to create the piece.

"It doesn't stop," he says.

The effect can seem chaotic but critics say, if you are open to it, Cunningham's work can be deeply profound.

Creating the music for "Ocean" was even more complicated. John Cage died in 1992, having developed some ideas, but no music. Some people thought the project was dead, but others, including composer Andrew Culver, were keen to keep going. It was he who took up the task. That's why he was searching for a coin in a rehearsal room at the College of St. Benedicts the other evening.

"I've got a quarter," he says, pulling it out of his pocket.

"OK, so evens are heads and odds are tails," he declares before tossing the coin. He deftly catches it, and reveals it's heads. "Evens go first."

The toss was to decide the order for the first ensemble rehearsal of the 150 musicians.

This is a very different kind of music. Culver says John Cage specified that it should be 90 minutes long, and comprise of 19 sections.

"Cage's music in the last 20, 30 years of his life all started with the idea of duration being the most important decision," Culver says. "In fact, early on he decided that melody and harmony wasn't of interest to him, rhythm was. And rhythm is the expression of duration in music."

Culver developed musical phrases and then used a computer to help him with his chance operations. He used it to choose not only what different instruments will play, but even where the musicians will sit in the huge circle surrounding the audience.

"There is no score," Culver says. "There's 150 solo parts. Everyone is a soloist," he says.

"Ocean" has been performed, but rarely. Because of the cost this is only the second time it's ever been done with 150 musicians.

Outside in the corridor, a stream of cellists, brass players and percussionists pours down the hall into an enormous practice room already jammed with people from the St. Cloud Symphony.

This is where another key element of the performance becomes clear. Culver uses a computer to project a huge digital timer on the wall and there will be several such clocks around the stage for the performance. First they will count down to zero, which is when the piece begins. Then the clocks start counting up to 90 minutes.

The musicians may not have a score, but they do have parts. They're split into time sections during which they play certain notes, in ways they can choose.

In the hall, with everyone bunched up, it sounds a little overwhelming. However, in the open space of the quarry, with its hard rock walls, no one really knows how it will sound.

The dancers will be dependent on the clocks too, matching their movements to the passage of time rather than the sound.

Ocean is being presented by the Walker Art Center, the Northrop Auditorium, the Benedicta Arts Center and the Cunningham Dance Foundation. The Walker has collaborated with Cunningham at least 15 times since the 1960s. The event is also being filmed as part of a long term effort to preserve Cunningham's work.

The Walker isn't releasing a budget for the event, but performing arts curator Philip Bither will say it's taking the full resources of all four artistic partners. He believes it's worth it.

"This is the largest, most expensive, I think in some ways most artistically powerful work that we have ever done," he says.

Bither says given the challenging nature of Cunningham's work everyone was a little surprised

when all the shows quickly sold out at \$50 a ticket. Bither says some people are coming from Europe.

"I do think people will look back in 10 or 20 or 50 years and say 'Were you at 'Ocean' in the quarry when Merce Cunningham made that work in Minnesota?'"

For his part Merce Cunningham is not going to rest much after "Ocean." He's already completed 40 minutes of a new piece which is scheduled to be presented on his 90th birthday next April.

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