

A dance set in stone

By GRAYDON ROYCE, Star Tribune

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WAITE PARK, MINN.

This is granite country. A stone's throw from the smiley face on Waite Park's water tower, is "Senior living at its best" in Granite Ridge Village. Down the road is the 500-acre Quarry Park and Nature Preserve, and 15 miles away is Cold Spring Granite -- among the world's largest quarries.

So it seems inevitable that granite would play a role in the unlikely story of how downtown New York dancers landed in a Waite Park quarry.

Minnesota's cultural event of the season is the result of whimsy and coincidence, of rock crushers rubbing elbows with the avant garde.

As the sun sets over the striped granite walls of Rainbow Quarry tonight, 14 dancers and 150 musicians will re-create Merce Cunningham's "Ocean." Fans from around the world along with critics from New York and Los Angeles will mix with prairie folks as the rarely produced modern-art masterwork plays out in this primeval stone crucible.

For the next three nights, buses will ferry 1,200 spectators (the show is sold out) down a specially constructed road that circles three levels to the bottom of the quarry, operated by Martin Marietta Materials.

"Placing art in natural, spectacular settings opens people up to new experiences," said Philip Bither, performing-arts curator at the Walker Art Center, one of the sponsoring organizations. "It's part of what contemporary art has tried to do through the last century -- getting people to look at their everyday lives as magical and intriguing art. That setting takes your breath away."

How Martin Marietta -- the second-largest producer of crushed stone, sand and gravel in the United States -- came to embrace a sprawling creation by Cunningham and composer John Cage defies logic.

"We're supposed to be breaking rock this time of year," said Mark Johnson, Martin Marietta's regional vice president. "So this is a new step for us, but the industry is trying to be more open about showing people what we do."

An unlikely request

Cunningham, 89, has built his iconoclastic legend by breaking convention with his deconstruction of dance and his muscular aesthetic. Based in New York, he nonetheless has a long relationship with Minnesota institutions, including the Walker and the College of St. Benedict, near St. Cloud.

In April 2005, Cunningham representatives and Anna Thompson, then St. Ben's fine-arts program director, talked about doing "Ocean." It was a great idea, but where? Thompson's musician husband recalled playing an orchestra concert in a quarry in Indiana. Thompson knew granite was king in central Minnesota ("I knew there was a quarry festival each year") but she had never actually seen a pit. So she piled the two Cunningham reps into her truck and drove to Martin Marietta's office in Waite Park.

When the office secretary stonewalled her request to look at the quarry, Thompson mentioned her husband's concert experience in Indiana.

Suddenly, a fellow sitting nearby in an orange vest and hard hat, piped up.

"That was on the cover of Pit and Quarry Magazine!" said Tim Kuball, the assistant plant manager.

Kuball showed Thompson and her guests the quarry. Shortly thereafter, the dance people were explaining to Martin Marietta officials just who Merce Cunningham is, and why it made sense to produce abstract dance and music in a granite pit.

Thompson, now at Notre Dame University, laughs at the recollection.

"Whenever I've gone back, if I see Tim, I always tell him, 'It's all because of you,'" she said.

Still, the project would have withered had the Walker and the Northrop Dance Series not stepped in as partners with St. Ben's. Bither said the project is budgeted at roughly \$600,000. The Walker will shoulder production costs, St. Ben's will cover the artists' fees, Martin Marietta agreed to prepare the site, Northrop Dance Series put in substantial money and John and Sage Cowles provided a critical private gift. Sage Cowles once chaired Cunningham's foundation.

In addition, the Mellon Foundation funded filmmaker Charles Atlas to document the performance, likely the last time "Ocean" will be produced, because of its cost.

Busting rock, making art

Mike Reinert, Martin Marietta's plant manager, crushed rock for the U.S. Army before coming to Waite Park in 2005.

"Busting rocks, and farming and doing construction and soldiering for 20 years, that's what I know," he said. "I won't say we weren't a little apprehensive, but the people from Merce Cunningham were very excited about it and I guess it was kind of contagious."

Reinert, who oversaw construction of the mile-long access road into the quarry, has another reason to be intrigued. His son is a dancer at Florida State University.

"It's opened my eyes," he said.

Reinert's reaction is not unique. Shaunna Johnson, Waite Park's city administrator, said "Ocean" has made officials realize the unique value of quarries.

"You have all this business on the streets [of Waite Park] and not far away is this back-in-time place," she said. "This is giving us a different perspective on what to do."

Terry Vermillion, who heads the music department at St. Cloud State University, quickly volunteered when the call went out for 150 musicians to play Cage's ethereal music. The group first rehearsed Sunday, but Vermillion feels his jazz background should help him improvise with the homemade instruments intended to evoke ocean sounds.

"We went to the hardware store to buy BBs and pellets for the ocean drum," he said.

Bither has chatted up civic groups about the project, explaining Cunningham's history and the magic of the quarry.

"One of my favorite experiences has been to get to know the guys who run the quarry," Bither said. "You immediately think these are tough guys who are going to have no interest in dance, but they're completely excited about the project. And they want to break up a bunch of stones into handheld sizes so people can leave with a souvenir of granite from the quarry. They're collaborators on the artistic experience."

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