

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Acquires Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Collection

June 6, 2000, New York City -- At a press conference today, New York Public Library President Paul LeClerc announced the Library's acquisition of one of the most important collections in dance: the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Collection. A vast and varied mosaic of documents of Merce Cunningham and the Cunningham Dance Company, dating from the 1930s to today, this collection will reside in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Merce Cunningham and the Cunningham Dance Foundation have provided us with a three-fold treasure," said Dr. LeClerc. "The collection stands on its own as the history of one of this century's seminal artists and his company. Additionally, it is the still developing record of a choreographer who continues to be at the cutting edge of his art form. Finally, in conjunction with the Library's John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, we have a many-layered account of a remarkable partnership."

Merce Cunningham, who participated in this special preview of highlights from the collection, noted, "My work has been here in New York City for over 60 years. I am happy that this collection, which has been organized by our long-time Archivist, David Vaughan, will be in the Performing Arts Library of the same city, like the music manuscripts of John Cage."

Cunningham is internationally recognized and honored as a choreographer of originality and genius. His innovations -- his non-linear, non-narrative approach to dance, the independence of the dance from the other components of music, sets, and costumes, his use of space -- have had enormous influence in all the arts and made him one of the leaders of the avant-garde. The materials of this collection illustrate his contributions and include his choreographic notes and computer records; films, videos, and photographs; music; his writings, lectures, and interviews; documentation of costumes and other design elements; detailed files of repertory and touring; posters, flyers, theater programs and, news clippings.

Merce Cunningham has always worked with outstanding composers, artists/designers, filmmakers, and videographers. These collaborators, whose contributions are reflected in the collection, read like a roll call of the last 60 years of contemporary culture and include such artists as Charles Atlas, David Behrman, Earle Brown, John Cage, Elliot Caplan, Morris Graves, Lou Harrison, Jasper Johns, Takehisa Kosugi, Mark Lancaster,

Robert Morris, Gordon Mumma, Bruce Nauman, Isamu Noguchi, Pauline Oliveros, Nam June Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, Marsha Skinner, Frank Stella, David Tudor, Andy Warhol, and Christian Wolff.

John Cage was the company's music director from its beginning in 1953 until his death in 1992. Now to be housed under one roof with the John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, which the Music Division acquired in 1995, the Cunningham acquisition makes the Library for the Performing Arts an unrivaled repository for their pioneering artistry.

In his remarks at the press conference, William Walker, Andrew W. Mellon Director of The New York Public Library's Research Libraries, took note of this and discussed the ways the various research collections dovetail. "A major advantage of a large library such as ours is context -- the opportunity to work with interrelated collections and materials. The use of the collection will be enhanced by the opportunity to use the materials in conjunction with the collections of artists who have been among Merce Cunningham's most frequent and important collaborators," he said.

The Cunningham Collection In the dance world, the Cunningham Collection is a rare and enviable compilation of the artifacts of a choreographer and his company. It was begun unofficially by David Vaughan when he was hired by Merce Cunningham as studio administrator in December 1959. At that time, as Vaughan has written, "I began to organize the records of the company's history for my own interest and amusement as much as anything." In 1976, his job as archivist was formalized by a National Endowment for the Arts grant for a two-year pilot project. At the end of that period, the Cunningham Foundation asked him to remain as the first archivist in the history of American dance companies. The wealth of materials he had to work with is also remarkable. Merce Cunningham keeps detailed notes on all his dances and, since 1991, has used the computer program LifeForms to choreograph his works.

The Cunningham Collection's works on paper include a virtually complete set of programs of performances; posters and flyers; Cunningham's personal choreographic notes from the 1930s to the present; books and periodicals of writing by Cunningham and Cage, as well as books and periodicals about the Cunningham Dance Company. The electronic media works include Cunningham's personal choreographic notes, dating from 1991, constituting some 50 hours of computer files; original moving camera recordings related to Cunningham's film/video collaborations; master films and videotapes; and recordings of performances and rehearsals, recorded interviews, documentaries, and newscasts featuring Cunningham and his work. There

are approximately 1,000 still images, approximately 200 hours of audiotapes and phonograph records of music relating to the repertoire; and sound recordings of music and of interviews, lectures and symposia, and oral histories.

"The collection, which is in the process of being cataloged and digitized, will come to the Library over a period of three years," reported Madeleine Nichols, Curator of the Dance Division. "I am proud to have this archive as the newest addition to the Library, and it will be completely available for research purposes, except for Mr. Cunningham's choreographic notes, which will be opened to the public in 2024."

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts is the largest and most comprehensive repository of its kind in the world. This new acquisition strengthens and deepens the Dance Division's acclaimed collection of archival materials, which has recently been enriched by the Rudolf Nureyev, Jerome Robbins, and Lincoln Kirstein collections. In keeping with the Library's mission, the Merce Cunningham Dance Collection will be preserved and made available for scholarly use free of charge to the public.

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts is the world's most extensive combination of circulating, reference, and rare archival collections in its field. The four research collections include the Music Division, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, the Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection. The circulating collection includes books on theatre, dance, music, film, and television; music scores; audio recordings; and videotapes, which may be borrowed by library cardholders. The Library also sponsors exhibitions, free performance series, and discussions on issues relating to the performing arts.

During the renovation of its Lincoln Center home, the Library for the Performing Arts is housed in temporary quarters. The Research Collections are available at the Library Annex at 531 West 43rd Street, and the Circulating Collections are available at the Mid-Manhattan Library at Fifth Avenue and 40th Street. The redesign and refurbishment of the Library for the Performing Arts, which is undergoing its first full-scale renovation since opening in 1965, will allow it to expand its services and programs to meet the changing needs of its users in the coming century. Designed by Polshek Partnership Architects, work on the renovation began in July 1998 and is scheduled to be completed in spring 2001.

Merce Cunningham Merce Cunningham, born in 1919 in Centralia,

Washington, studied tap and ballroom dancing locally before enrolling in the Cornish School in Seattle where he studied with Bonnie Bird, a former Graham dancer, and where he met John Cage, a young composer hired as a dance accompanist. Cunningham became the second man invited to join Martha Graham's company, and he danced with her from 1939 to 1945. With the music for *Credo in Us* (a dance he created jointly with Jean Erdman) and the music for his own solo, *Totem Ancestor*, in 1942 he began an artistic partnership with John Cage that lasted for 50 years.

In 1944, Cunningham and Cage presented their first joint concert of solo dances and music in New York, which became an annual event. Then, in 1948, they made their first cross-country tour of the United States and spent the summer at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where the summer faculty also included Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Richard Lippold, and Arthur Penn. Early in their careers, both Cage and Cunningham attended lectures on Zen Buddhism and were influenced by the ideas and work of Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism.

In the early 1950s, Cage began to use chance operations as an element in his music and Cunningham, too, began to use chance to determine the order of his dances and gradually to determine the placement in space of his dancers. Cunningham used chance to free him from the limitations of intuition and habit and to open up possibilities. At the end of the summer of 1953, Cunningham and dancers Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber, Remy Charlip, and Paul Taylor gave two performances at Black Mountain College that marked the genesis of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Since that time, Cunningham has choreographed approximately 170 works and he and his company continue to generate excitement and foment new ideas on the international culture circuit.

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