

Fall 2008

Ballet Review

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**Merce Cunningham:
The Dia Beacon Events**





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Cover photo by Tom Brazil: Jennifer Goggans and Rashaun Mitchell,
Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Dia:Beacon.



Andrea Weber, Rashaun Mitchell, and Robert Swinston. (Photo: Tom Brazil)

Beacon Event

Sandra Genter

A spectacular visual art setting, live music, and choreography by Merce Cunningham constitute the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's two-year Hudson Valley Project, a residency partnership with Dia:Beacon, Bard College, and the John Cage Trust at Bard. Four site-specific *Events*, one a season (autumn, winter, spring, and summer), are presented in the Dia galleries. For each, excerpts from the repertory and new material are arranged, and composer/performers, lighting design, and costumes selected. Each program is performed twice.

The third *Event*, which I saw in May, would have delighted Cunningham's longtime collaborator Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), to whom the program was dedicated. In keeping with Rauschenberg's iconoclastic sensibility, there were some indeterminate choices for the audience, dancers, and musicians. In addition to wearing unitards in vibrant hues (costume color abounded in this program), embellished with lovely individual floral designs by the talented Anna Finke, there were also pants, T-shirts, and dresses for the dancers to add ad libitum. Earth-tone colors in the unitard's lower legs might suggest the roots of a plant; one costume had a fern design wrapped around the dancer's left waist.

Live music – electronics, keyboard, and glass objects – was played by the composers David Behrman, Miguel Frascioni, Marina Rosenfeld, and Richard Teitelbaum in various movable locations. Audience seating was a choice: outdoors under a covered tent or inside in the building's lower-floor galleries. You could also walk around the two stages, which were connected by a ramp for the dancers to enter or exit.

Under the covered bleacher at the two o'clock performance I could see springtime

foliage through the transparent sections of the tent and hear a light rain falling. The white outdoor stage is twice the size of the indoor one, allowing for big locomotor movement. The *Event* consisted of close to an hour of ongoing movement passages, from solos to large groups, with both light and dark motifs. Elongated body lines and elegance as well as the vast space covered in runs, skips, and leaps are givens for the MCDC.

To open, Emma Desjardins and Daniel Squire entered with great gusto and presence. These two accomplished performers danced sublimely, arching their upper bodies while extending their legs into high arabesques. They circled the stage skipping, executed a wild turning phrase, and danced alone or joined together. At one point she suddenly fell sideways onto his body. When they exited it was as quickly as they had arrived.

There are always inspired surprises to encounter with the master dancemaker. How many ways can a couple have a body connection without holding hands? Cunningham constructs the linking of his dancers in a multitude of unconventional ways, as seen throughout his vast repertory. Holley Farmer's supine horizontal layout on the back of Squire was part of a striking duet in the winter *Event*. Marcie Munnerlyn and Koji Mizuta, also paired then, were memorable for their quintessential quiet beauty and harmony in an intimate and spare duet. To see them dance next on this third program was equally exciting. He was in a light violet costume and she wore soft green for their well-matched, impressive performance. A lively trio followed, with Mizuta joined by Farmer and Jennifer Goggans in a section of fast footwork. The three were closely joined by linking arms in a happy skipping, hopping dance that culminated in a run offstage.

Julie Cunningham and Daniel Madoff excelled in a difficult and powerfully danced duet with material from *August Pace* (1989). Often paired together, she with hair very close to her beautifully shaped scull and he with a mass of curls wore matching (most likely by chance)

blue unitards. They were superb in creating lines of movement that thrust to distant points. Cunningham's feet can bore a hole and her off-balance leg extensions are brilliantly daring. Both their quick lifts and slow controlled phrases generated awe.

This third *Event* was a farewell for Lisa Boudreau, and although there is a no-star policy in the company, there was an added energy and attention to her dancing this day. Choosing a dress over her unitard, Boudreau looked perfect for her duet with Brandon Collwes, with its flowing patterns of deep forward bending and back arching. Boudreau's duet evolved into a trio for her with Farmer and Silas Riener, followed by a quartet with traditional dance walks (leading with the toe) and a tender moment when the two cavaliers lift their ladies. Rashaun Mitchell continues to perform remarkable feats with finesse, such as a series of back hinges with a reverse twist just before landing and continuous full-speed runs with quick stops into body shapes, reminiscent of Cunningham in his prime. All fourteen dancers appeared on each stage, most more than once. The final outdoor sequence was an ensemble section for three men and three women.

The 4:30 performance, indoors, allowed me to catch some of the dancing I previously saw outside. With the musicians now actively in view, I found myself more involved with the changing sounds of the score that embellished the choreography, conventionally separate and independent from the dance. I especially enjoyed the use of the glass objects created by Miguel Frascón and the music of longtime Cunningham associate David Behrman

The opening dancing, mainly on the floor, involved provocative contact between Andrea

Weber and Collwes from *Canfield* (1968). The sequence had a mysterious drama to its closing dark stillness, when he lifts her up into his arms. A sextet changed the mood with their swift, lightly pattering feet in a section from *Scramble* (1967). Another quiet, soft-edged duet for Weber, now dancing with Mitchell, had rocking, twisting, recurring material from *Squaregame* (1976). Also from *Squaregame* came a playful trio with terrific lifts for Goggans carried between Madoff and Mizuta with her knees curled up under her, and in another quirky section dancers were dragged and wrapped around their partners.

The indoor space provided a different perspective and, because of the smaller stage, a more personal and intimate atmosphere. The program also included excerpts from *Steps* (1973), *Doubles* (1984), and other repertory from the past, more recent work like *Interscape* (2000), and new choreography geared to a dancer and to the space. It was good to see Robert Swinston, assistant to Cunningham and valuable twenty-eight-year company veteran, perform in a trio section from *Interscape*, a work originally created with design collaboration by the much missed Rauschenberg.

Dia:Beacon's lush surroundings and the museum itself require no additional visual effects. In fact, the setting is an especially fitting venue considering Cunningham's historic collaborative relationships with simpatico giants in the visual arts. Critically acclaimed, the magnificent dancers are outstanding in realizing the brilliant work. Now in his late eighties, Merce Cunningham continues to have a full palette of possibilities for providing a rare and splendid dance experience. Let there be more to come.

As part of its two-year Hudson Valley Project the Merce Cunningham Dance Company performed four *Events* in the Dia:Beacon Riggio Galleries devoted to (1) Andy Warhol's *Shadows*, September 2007, shown on pp. 73-75; (2) Walter De Maria's *Equal Area Series*, January 2008, pp. 76-79; (3) Bruce Nauman, May 2008, pp. 80-83; and (4) Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses*, July 2008, pp. 84-88. Members of the MCDC who danced at Beacon were Jonah Bokaer, Lisa Boudreau, Brandon Collwes, Julie Cunningham, Emma Desjardins, Holley Farmer, Jennifer Goggans, Daniel Madoff, Rashaun Mitchell, Koji Mizuta, Marcie Munnerlyn, Silas Reiner, Daniel Squire, Robert Swinston, Melissa Toogood, and Andrea Weber. The next Dia:Beacon *Event* takes place December 6-7, 2008.

Dia: Beacon 1, 2, 3, 4

Photographs by Tom Brazil





























