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Finding Your Identity Through Knowing Dance History

A documentary about Merce Cunningham shows today's dancers what it takes to continually innovate by understanding the past and taking fearless leaps into the present

by Connor Senning

The American Masters Production titled *Merce Cunningham: A Lifetime of Dance*, directed by Charles Atlas, is an absolute must-see for those who want inspiration and a new choreographic approach in only ninety minutes. Viewers will see how Cunningham's chance procedures developed, his technological innovations such as the computer program Life Forms, and much more. The 2001 film opens the doors to the world where Cunningham grew up, was inspired, and consequently paved the way for his unparalleled career in dance. There are many interesting glimpses into his interactions with other famous modern dance choreographers and collaborators, but it certainly leaves a lot left for the imagination when trying to fit this extraordinary choreographer's entire career into a just an hour and a half.

For fifty years, Cunningham was at the forefront of the American avant-garde, and for dancers, seeing how some early Cunningham works came to be is an enlightening experience. In a few short interviews, Cunningham himself shares his own history, from his early years of being a tap dancer to his inspirations taken from vaudeville and theatre. "Realizing our own identity through the act of dancing," Cunningham says, is something that young dancers need to know more about. It asks the question of how much of our own dance history do we truly know (or need to know), and isn't it something we should be more informed about to share with the younger generations trailing behind us in hopes of creating their own legacy?

The film pays tribute to other choreographers like Martha Graham and the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who designed lights, sets, and costumes for the Cunningham company. Endlessly inquisitive and fresh, Cunningham was a choreographer who was always reaching across the lines into other forms of art in order to expand his own explorations in performance, including collaborations with visual artists, architects, designers, and musicians. Creating intimate relationships with those he met along the way in New York City and the Black Mountain School in North Carolina, where the company was formed, was all a part of how Cunningham was able to create more possibility. He was an observer of the world and rejected conventional elements of dance structure with its relation to music, formations, and the way danced is viewed in order to change the way people see artists in the world of dance. For young students, it's crucial to get to know more about a choreographer like this, a true original.

The most intimate relationship of all for Cunningham as a choreographer, was with visionary composer John Cage. In their work together, music and dance existing separately until coming together onstage, a revolutionary method. The relationship of dance and music influenced by this collaboration was controversial and necessary for dance because it opened the flood gates of possibilities for other artists to discover what dance, art, and music could be in relation to each

other. This documentary does a commendatory job of sampling the work between the two artists, while it also explains his significance to dance history and development. “No one else made dance that looked remotely like this, and at the same time no one else had Cunningham's conceptual ambitions,” said David Vaughn after Cunningham’s death in 2009. *Pond Way*, *Beach Birds for Camera*, and *BIPED* are a few of the works of major significance scattered throughout the film.

Be warned that there is more commentary than performance, so if you want all choreography you may be disappointed. “This documentary's chopped-up quality might have been prevented with longer dance excerpts and fewer interruptions by various commentators,” said Rose Anne Thom, reviewing for *Dance Magazine*. “Dance titles are subtitled; dancers are not. This is a great offense to the artists.” In the film, Cunningham alludes to the amount of collaboration between him and the dancers, so it brings up the question: When is it necessary to mention the names of the dancers who collaborated on certain works, especially when those works are done by someone who had a name as big as Merce Cunningham? It’s an issue that pertains to today, as well. How do you credit dancers who have been integral to the choreography of a work your name is on? Perhaps it’s something to be discussed early on in the collaboration process, so that all involved are on the same page as to who gets what kind of credit on a program. Now that Cunningham is gone, unfortunately there is no asking him his thoughts on the subject, but future choreographers and dancers can decide about the future.

After fifty years of making dance, Cunningham died at the age of 90, still believing that, “Dancing is the art of the present tense.” The film is urging dance students to get to know more about those who came before them and how much transformation goes into “the present tense.” Getting to know the choreographers and dancers who laid the groundwork for what we see today in the modern dance world pays tribute to the incredible leaps they took towards the endless possibilities of dance. Cunningham opened doors, broke down barriers, and changed the landscape of dance. He did not do it alone. He did it with his community, by extending his hand and asking others to say “yes” to his unusual process and unique ideas of what could be.

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