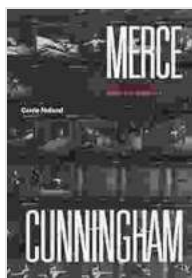


Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary

Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) was an American dancer and choreographer who, along with his long-time collaborator, composer John Cage, revolutionized the art form of dance in the 20th century. Cunningham's unique approach to choreography, which he called "pure dance," rejected traditional notions of narrative, character, and musical accompaniment. Instead, he focused on the movement itself, exploring its possibilities and limitations through experimentation and chance procedures.

Early Life and Influences

Merce Cunningham was born in Centralia, Washington, in 1919. He began taking dance classes at an early age and eventually studied with Martha Graham, one of the pioneers of modern dance. Cunningham's early experiences with Graham's work left a lasting impression on him, but he ultimately rejected her emphasis on emotion and expression in favor of a more abstract and impersonal approach to dance.



Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary by Carrie Noland

★★★★☆ 4 out of 5

Language	: English
File size	: 15623 KB
Text-to-Speech	: Enabled
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In the late 1930s, Cunningham met John Cage, a composer who shared his interest in experimentation and chance procedures. Cage's ideas about indeterminacy and randomness deeply influenced Cunningham's work, and the two men would collaborate on numerous projects throughout their lives.

Choreographic Innovations

Cunningham's choreographic innovations can be traced back to his early experiments with chance procedures. In 1951, he created the "Variation 5" section of Suite for Five, in which he used a table of random numbers to determine the order of dance steps. This radical departure from traditional choreography paved the way for Cunningham's subsequent works, which were increasingly characterized by their unpredictability and lack of predetermined structure.

Cunningham also explored the use of non-dance elements in his work, such as sets, props, and lighting. He believed that these elements could enhance the visual and spatial qualities of dance, and he often collaborated with artists from other disciplines to create multi-sensory performances.

Chance Procedures

Chance procedures played a central role in Cunningham's choreographic process. He believed that by eliminating the element of intentionality, he could create dances that were both surprising and revealing. Cunningham used a variety of methods to generate random sequences, including coin flips, dice rolls, and random number tables.

The use of chance procedures did not mean that Cunningham's dances were completely random. He carefully controlled the parameters of his experiments, and he used his knowledge of dance to shape the results of the chance procedures. The resulting dances were often complex and intricate, but they also had a sense of freedom and spontaneity that was unlike anything that had been seen before in dance.

Collaboration with John Cage

John Cage's influence on Cunningham's work cannot be overstated. Cage's ideas about indeterminacy and randomness deeply influenced Cunningham's choreographic process, and the two men collaborated on numerous projects throughout their lives.

One of their most famous collaborations was the dance "4'33'" (1952), in which Cunningham performed four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence on stage. The piece challenged traditional notions of music and dance, and it remains one of the most controversial works in the history of both art forms.

Legacy

Merce Cunningham's work had a profound impact on the art form of dance. His radical approach to choreography, which rejected traditional notions of narrative, character, and musical accompaniment, paved the way for a new generation of dancers and choreographers.

Cunningham's legacy extends beyond his own work. He founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953, which has continued to perform his work and the work of other choreographers after his death. The company is

now one of the most respected dance companies in the world, and it continues to inspire and challenge audiences around the globe.

Merce Cunningham was one of the most influential choreographers of the 20th century. His radical approach to dance, which embraced chance procedures and non-dance elements, revolutionized the art form and paved the way for a new generation of dancers and choreographers.

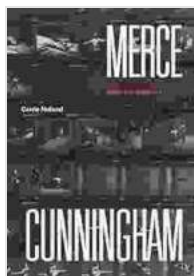
Cunningham's legacy continues to inspire and challenge audiences around the world, and his work remains a testament to the power and beauty of dance.

Further Reading

- Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary by David Vaughan
- Merce Cunningham by Deborah Jowitt
- The Merce Cunningham Dance Company: Fifty Years by Siobhan Davies

Image Credits

- Merce Cunningham by Martha Swope, Library of Congress
- 4'33"" by John Cage, Library of Congress
- Merce Cunningham Dance Company by Jack Mitchell, Library of Congress



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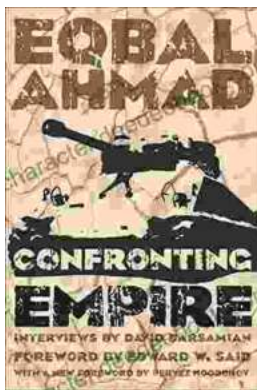
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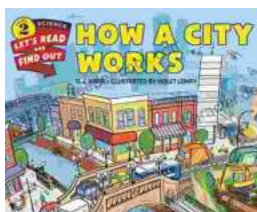
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