



"The Cunningham moment. The emergence of an essential dance reference in France"

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“CUNNINGHAM
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Translated by Marisa Hayes from: « Le moment Cunningham. L'émergence d'une référence incontournable de la danse en France... », *Repères - cahier de danse*, avril 2009, p. 3-6.

THE Sylviane PAGES “CUNNINGHAM MOMENT” THE EMERGENCE OF AN ESSENTIAL DANCE REFERENCE IN FRANCE

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Merce Cunningham's reception in France is truly a “critical case study”: examining the press' reactions to the choreographer allows us to highlight a history of consecration as much as it does an evolution of views and discourses on dance between the years of 1960 and 1980.

In two decades--from the 1960s to the 1980s--Cunningham's reception in France went from controversy to consecration, resulting in the almost overwhelming omnipresence of the choreographer. At the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, this success made Cunningham as much a source of attraction as it did a repellent during a time when dance in France was profoundly marked by the emergence of a new generation of choreographers named “jeune danse française” (young French dance). To be interested in Cunningham's institutional reception and his impact on dancers' imaginations and practices consists then in tracing the history of the emergence of this “new dance” in France, and studying what Cunningham “did” to contemporary dance. This involves returning to the crucial moment during which the choreographic field structured itself according to contemporary dance's development.¹

¹ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field is particularly pertinent here to characterize the upheavals of the dance world in France, as a field is defined by its autonomous nature--that the dance world acquired precisely under the effects of dance policies initiated in the 1970s--and by its structuring in force-fields, struggles, and aesthetic debates, which lived on through the wide visibility of “new dance” in France.

A Reception Marked By Controversy

Presented in a choreographic context that was rather fossilized and unfavorable to avant-garde choreographies, the first Cunningham pieces programmed in the France of the 1960s (at Théâtre de l'Est Parisien and the Festival des Baux de Provence in 1964, and at the Festival international de danse de Paris in 1966) were received with difficulty by the public and critics alike. Note that the field of the performing arts at the time was rarely open to international companies or choreographic creation. Contemporary international choreographers were only able to access the French stage here and there during infrequent tours. While the 1960s and the 1970s were largely dominated by the Paris Opera and Maurice Béjart's neo-classical aesthetic--modern dance suffered from a widespread lack of institutional visibility and media attention—how was this American contemporary choreographer accepted, becoming indispensable? The study of critical sources during this period--primarily press clippings from major daily newspapers conserved in the "Merce Cunningham" file at the médiathèque of the Centre national de la danse (National Dance Center)--allows us to retrace the choreographer's path and understand why his arrival in this context could be none other than turbulent.

Indeed, the discovery of Cunningham in France elicited critical polemic and public controversy, as it did during the performance of *Signals* that "violently divided the Odéon Theatre"² in 1970. Critics systematically echoed strong reactions from a portion of the public, either finding in them the sign of a particularly strong artistic statement, or using accounts of the public's whistling to mask their own circumspection. In the article "Cunningham règle ses ballets du rythme de son hoquet"³ ("Cunningham organizes his ballets to the rhythm of his hiccups"), the critic Jacqueline Cartier's misgivings can be felt in her cold description of the absent décor: "a back door opened brusquely onto Vaugirard Street the other night, we were privy to the heads of curious passersby, cars, and even a police cruiser..." However, in contrast to what one might think, it was not the bodies or Cunningham's dance that were controversial, but rather the music and his particular use of it that drew fire. The majority of critics judged John Cage's music to be deafening, uncomfortable, torturous, and even useless. Nevertheless, artists as early as 1966 bestowed copious praise upon the work, because while the contemporary music was frequently considered problematic, the dancers' bodies were accepted without reticence and their technique was often emphasized in a positive light. Gilberte Cournand considered them "masters of space" and underlined "the flexibility, the lightness and the 'ballon' of the entire company".⁵ Claude Sarraute was impressed by these "superb athletes, superiorly trained",⁶ the "exceptional quality of the dancers"⁷ on account of their "inimitable balance"⁸, their "superb

² Jacqueline Cartier, "Cunningham règle ses ballets au rythme de son hoquet", 9 June, 1970, Cunningham File, Archives of the médiathèque of the CND. As with several press clippings in this file, the title of the newspaper is not mentioned.

³ *Idem.*

⁴ *Idem.*

⁵ Gilberte Cournand, "Tumulte et ovation pour 6 ballets américains", 12 November, 1966, Archives of the médiathèque of the CND.

⁶ Claude Sarraute, "Second programme de la compagnie Merce Cunningham", *Le Monde*, 9 June, 1970.

⁷ *Combat*, 18 June 1964. Quoted by Jacques Cottias, *La venue de la modern dance américaine en France 1960-1970*, Mémoire de maîtrise (Master's thesis) in history, Université Paris 7, 1983, p. 71.

⁸ *Idem.*

suspended jumps",⁹ or the mastery of "their muscles in a beautiful way".¹⁰ Early on, the Cunningham bodies were, surprisingly, looked upon and evaluated according to the same aesthetic categories embodied by classical ballet.

Cunningham's pieces seemed to be received, analyzed, and described through the prism of classical ballet, as supported by the title of the article, "Beau comme du classique" ("Beautiful Like Classical Ballet").¹¹ Within this framework, the fact that Cunningham himself danced on stage was often perceived as problematic and out of synch with his troupe: his "advanced" age (he was born in 1919) was repeatedly noted, and at times, even denounced.

Progressively, the critical debate evolved, revealing as much a change of perception regarding Cunningham's pieces as a growing openness towards contemporary creation on the part of the press. Cunningham's critical reception seems indeed to have shifted dramatically in 1970 during his visit to the Odéon-Théâtre de France/Théâtre des Nations, where certain journalists revealed their discomfort when confronted with his artistic proposals, strongly challenging the way they viewed and described dance. As such, Jacques Baril proposed to abandon the inappropriate notion of ballet and to modify an entire way of writing: "Banish the word ballet from your vocabulary and your thoughts".¹² Claude Samuel noted the dismantlement of notions of the choreographic work and masterpiece that Cunningham and Cage's work induced. In his article, "Que faire en attendant l'extase : bailler d'ennui ou pleurer d'émotion?" ("What to do While Waiting for Ecstasy: Yawn From Boredom or Cry of Emotion?"),¹³ he relates his journey as a spectator, first profoundly bored, and the change that occurred in his critical approach: Cunningham's dance required him to renounce his expectations of a choreographic "work", which he felt should implicitly rely on an emotional acme. This involves "forgetting everything that academic dance brought us",¹⁴ accepting this "succession of very simple and elementary movements that are neither without grace nor without poetry"¹⁵ and to see "in the dancers' very natural attitudes the possibility of a plant that waits... or a suspended ray of light".¹⁶ The author's conclusion is significant of the shift that occurred in the decade of the 1970s regarding the perception of Cunningham: "Ultimately Merce Cunningham offers us a totally American avant-garde".¹⁷

From then on, throughout the 1970s, discussions of Cunningham's pieces were conferred to specialized critics of modern dance, recently emerged, but handled by journalists that one might describe as militant,¹⁸ such as Lise Brunel and Marcelle Michel. Cunningham was thus visible in both the major daily newspapers as well as a more specialized press--*Les Saisons de la danse*, *Pour la danse*--which began to open up to modern dance. It was during this dramatic shift in dance criticism that one began to notice the "liberating

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ Jacqueline Cartier, *ibid.*

¹¹ Marcelle Michel, "Beau comme du classique", *Pour la danse*, December, 1982, n°85.

¹² Jacques Baril, "Présence de Cunningham", *Les Saisons de la danse*, November, 1970.

¹³ Claude Samuel, "Que faire en attendant l'extase : bailler d'ennui ou pleurer d'émotion", 13 June, 1970, Archives of the médiathèque of the CND.

¹⁴ *Idem.*

¹⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ *Idem.*

¹⁸ Raphaël de Gubernatis, quoted in "La danse et la presse : discours croisés" (*Repères, cahier de danse* n° 15), discusses "cultivated and engaged" women who express themselves with "frankness".

factors" of Cunningham's dance, thought of as a "choreographic revolution", to echo the *leitmotifs* of critical discussions. Articles by Marcelle Michel, Lise Brunel or "Notes and Reflections" by Geneviève Vincent, published in 1979 and 1980 in *Pour la danse*, laid the foundation for a theoretical discussion of Merce Cunningham that remains widely used today. In these texts, questions of spatial deconstruction, dance's independence from music, the use of everyday gestures, and chance compositional practices are all clearly presented, thus accompanying the presentation of Cunningham's performances with the dissemination of the choreographer's thoughts.

These first foundational articles inaugurated a new phase in Cunningham's reception in France, which were enriched by their editorial and theoretical dimensions. The book of interviews with Cunningham *Le danseur et la danse*¹⁹ (*The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in Conversation With Jacqueline Lesschaeve*), published in French in 1980 even before the English-language edition in 1985, opened the door to a series of publications on the choreographer's work. In the 1980s, Cunningham was thus clearly consecrated as a major figure in contemporary dance. As his increasingly numerous portraits in the press reveal, he was hailed as a charismatic personality, even mythic, to echo the title of an article in *Saisons de la danse*.²⁰

Cunningham at the Heart of Imaginations and Aesthetic Debates within "jeune danse" ("young dance") in France

The programming of ten of Cunningham's pieces at the 1979 edition of the Festival d'Automne, completed by several *Events* and an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou on the choreographer and his collaborators, is significant regarding the recognition that the choreographer acquired throughout the 1970s. At the turn of the decade in the 1980s, Cunningham had already performed at Théâtre de la Ville and the Paris Opera during the Festival d'Automne and the Avignon Festival, numerous prestigious places and new instances of recognition for an entire new generation of choreographers representing "young dance" or "contemporary dance".

This programming of Cunningham is framed within a wider movement of general curiosity and openness towards choreographic productions from the United States. From this point of view, the American Center played a crucial role in facilitating the discovery of the American avant-gardes "in a padlocked and fossilized Paris", according to Nelcy Delanoë, who described the history of this center.²¹ Symbolic of the recognition obtained in France by American choreographers, Carolyn Carlson was named Choreographer-Etoile at the Paris Opera in 1974, while Alwin Nikolais was appointed head of the CNDC (Centre national de danse

¹⁹ Merce Cunningham, Jacqueline Lesschaeve, *Le Danseur et la danse*, P. Belfond, 1980, 251 pages. Published in English in 1985, New York: M. Boyars, Scribner Book Companies.

²⁰ "Repères biographiques d'un mythe", *Les Saisons de la danse*, July, 1996, n°82.

²¹ Nelcy Delanoë, *Le Raspail Vert. L'American Center à Paris. 1934-1994. Une histoire des avant-gardes franco-américaines*, Se-ghers, 1994, p. 118.

contemporaine) in Angers, created in 1978. In 1981, Cunningham dancer Viola Farber was named Nikolai's replacement. Embodied in France by American choreographers, contemporary choreographic productions obtained greater visibility through these artists, as well as a form of legitimacy. Cunningham inspired numerous visits to New York and his studio became the training center *par excellence* for a new generation of French dancers including, Kilina Crémona, Michel Hallet Eghayan, Jacques Garnier, Didier Deschamps, Daniel Agesilas, Dominique Boivin, Micheline Lelièvre, and Jean-Claude Gallotta. As such, Cunningham became the essential reference of "nouvelle danse" (new dance).

During this period, marked by the illusion of a clean slate and the omission of modern dance infused with techniques and aesthetics from Germany,²² Cunningham's consecration, alongside other American choreographers, proved to be ambivalent, even hegemonic, for its role in relegating to the background modern choreographers who had been active in France for several decades, including Françoise et Dominique Dupuy, Karin Waehner, Jacqueline Robinson. Dominique Dupuy conveyed her perception of the "Americanization" and "liberation" of dance: "Following Germany, conqueror, conquered, succeeds a new colonialism, that of the Americans, bearers of, among other benefits of their civilization--blue jeans, chewing gum, Coca Cola... and the good word of *modern dance*. For those of us who align ourselves with German dance and are proud of it, it is a hard blow".²³

The field of choreography in France organized itself accordingly around this structural reference, a source of attraction as much as it was a repellent. One notes in certain choreographic pieces of the 1980s a new evolution towards a sinking of the body, which can be approached as a reaction to the Cunningham aesthetic: certain dancers looked elsewhere, particularly to butoh, for a dance closer to the ground, with a lower center of gravity, proposing most notably a fragilization of dance positions, far from the vertical and virtuoso Cunningham bodies, or Béjart's elevated classical corporeality. From these developments, the opposite of travelling to the United States emerged: trips to Japan linked to the discovery of butoh. Pioneers in this, Catherine Diverrière and Bernardo Montet established training at the Ohno Kazuo Studio as an alternative to travelling to New York: "When we went to Japan, we were strongly against American formalism, because we thought there was an abstraction situated beyond lines and geographic shapes".²⁴ The domination of erect and held bodies in the Cunningham style appeared in certain cases as "classical"--no longer in the sense that the word held for critics of the 1970s, but rather in the sense of a "new academicism".

Cunningham is thus at the heart of debates that traversed a choreographic field in full disruption. While during the decade of the 1970s he participated in shifting views from ballet to modern dance, at the beginning of the 1980s, Cunningham was at the center of a debate opposing "abstraction" and "expressio-

²² The principal modern dance artists in France were heavily influenced by the teachings of Mary Wigman, notably Jean Weidt, Jerome Andrews, Karin Waehner, and Jacqueline Robinson.

²³ Dominique Dupuy, in Amélie Grand et Philippe Verrière, *Où va la danse ? L'aventure de la danse par ceux qui l'ont vécue, actes des rencontres du 24 au 27 février 2003*, Hivernales d'Avignon, Seuil, Archimbaud, 2005, p. 38.

²⁴ Catherine Diverrière, "...la danse-désir", *Telex danse*, January, 1994, p. 5.

nism", according to choreographers of the time, and particularly opposing different relationships to space and gravity. Cunningham's consecration in France also presented the choreographer's œuvre as a "new academicism", as a heritage from which to depart. And it is precisely in this that one can measure Cunningham's "influence" in France, not as a linear transmission, a fluid history without divisions, but by the profound and enduring structuring of the choreographic field and the aesthetic debates that penetrate it. It is through this underlying action that Cunningham undeniably continues to shape dance today.

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