

Thought you might like an extra

For the Ages

K7

Cunningham, Merce:
Forward & Reverse
Brooklyn Academy of Music
October 14 through 19

Mark Haim
with André Gribou
Danspace St. Mark's
October 10 through 12

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

New York became a bigger apple last week, when it was possible both to prowling the enormous Robert Rauschenberg retrospective at two Guggenheims and pass the evenings watching the Merce Cunningham Dance Company perform four dances new to New York plus shards of older works collaged into "BAMEvents." The two men's careers intersected most intimately during the 1960s, when Rauschenberg was not only Cunningham's resident designer, but toured with the company. Yet they are equally prolific, original, and hugely gifted. Who would have imagined combining these materials in these ways? Or putting this step after that one?

What still amazes me after years of watching Cunningham is how full of human drama his pure movement pieces are. I don't mean drama of the they-love-each-other variety (although that crops up, too), but drama resulting from, say, the sudden darting arrival of a newcomer to a serene, barely moving world. In an excerpt from *Pictures* (1984), Michael Cole dances behind a frozen chain of people. Derry Swan approaches the line, and starts to join it. Instead, Robert Swinston detaches her, Cole steps through the opening created by their departure, and the two men carry her away. You can construct it as one of those street-corner encounters whose outcome you never know, as a dynamic of motion against stillness, or as the advent of an agent that alters a molecular structure.

The world premiere, *Scenario*, with its Rei Kawakubo costumes, dominated publicity for the season. It is indeed intriguing to see dancers in outfits padded to give them outrageous exaggerations of the bellies and butts and hunched shoulders they've spent years avoiding. In an all-white environment with fluorescent tubes overhead, against the vibrations and shimmerings of Takehisa Kosugi's electronic score, they resemble mannequins on a binge through an outer-space department store. At their most elegant, when the green-checked and blue-striped constructions are replaced by black ones, they assume the lineaments of leaping, three-dimensional artworks. You can detect, too, what might be very subtle references to runway behavior and the constraints of fashionable attire, but Cunningham, of necessity, keeps the movement open and contact between dancers at a minimum. The texture is bright and dry.

Just as visual artists often produce work in series, Cunningham appears to carry elements from one work into another. The 1996 *Rondo* opens with a clump of five dancers making mechanical little adjustments to their positions

the way mannequins might be shifted by an arranging hand, but this dance is richer and livelier. Gleaming oddly, it's set to John Cage's brilliantly assaultive *FOUR*, which contains such everyday interruptions as telephones ringing. The dancers wear sporty clothes (by Cunningham and Suzanne Gallo—first

also crop up in these newer dances.

Cunningham's world is rarified in terms of beauty and mystery, yet it speaks to us of processes we somehow know. In *Windows* (music by Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta), the decor a blown-up John Cage-painting), Holley Farmer leans back and stretches her legs in a voluptuous adagio; she never pauses as one man after another kneels to hold her on balance, but we feel the tension between her ongoing dance and the fragility of her changeable support. In *Installation*, Ogan and d'Immobilité dance rapidly, facing one another, arms wig-wagging furiously, never quite in sync. What does it mean? It

precision and in daring. No one is currently as vibrantly alive in Cunningham's work. That he—along with the wonderfully warm Michael Cole—is soon to leave the company is a blow.

The peculiar poster for the season foregrounds Cunningham's bear-up feet, with his head, more dimly lit, above them. The real feet are immaterial; the miraculous feet in his head never age.

FOR YEARS, STEVE PAXTON improvised to J. S. Bach's *The Goldberg Variations* as recorded by Glenn Gould, music and movement fusing into an elliptical and unforgettable meditation on the moment we were experiencing

with the performer. Mark Haim's two-part solo to the long version of the music has a different kind of power. He has choreographed the theme and its 30 variations and performs them to the expert playing of André Gribou. Because Gribou is attentive to the dance and Haim acknowledges him at times, the performance feels like a journey through Bach that the men have undertaken together—stepping with delicate precision through the composer's complexities, unraveling his longer lines, sinking into his

ent body. In Carol Mullins's beautiful lighting, his face, with its humorous eyes and imposing beak of a nose, looks noble. And, in fact, his dancing exudes a kind of nobility; there's something always balanced about him, even in crisis. In the slow, searching moments of the opening theme, when he falls backward to the floor or balances for a long time on one leg, you could imagine him a fallen angel. He probes the music for contrast, but not blatantly. Yes, he'll edo a dense variation with twitchy little foot-steps, or stride out boldly when Bach turns heroic. He plays with his material as the composer does, running phrases backward, or transforming steps through tone and context.

He's less formal sometimes—scratching his neck, practicing smiles, or spending one variation taking all his clothes off and the next one redressing in identical garments dropped from above. He spends Variation 25 racing out a door, reappearing in a sprint around the church balcony, and making it pianissimo just as Gribou finishes. Primed by the program, a few bold spectators take over Variation 14 and manipulate Haim (he then briefly arranges them in an artful plastique). Over time, the piece shows strain here and there, but it also becomes warmer, deeper, more personal, as if the weight of Bach's genius and his own tiring body freed Haim from the necessity of virtuosity.



Shape shifters: Matthew Mohr and Jean Freebury in Merce Cunningham's *Scenario*, costumed by Rei Kawakubo

colored, then black and white. Particularly entrancing is the episode in which the lively, complicated dancing of Glen Rumsey, Banu Ogan, and Lisa Boudreau seems connected by invisible strings to the remaining 11 dancers off-stage. Every time the trio moves right, the others spill onto the stage, fumbling their way through the movements as if learning them for the first time; if the three move left, they disappear. In a lovely duet, Foofowa d'Immobilité and Jeannie Steele—two of Cunningham's most riveting performers—face each other in a quickly intense promenade that's like a dislocated ballroom dance.

I also see subtle links between *Installation*, *Windows*, and excerpts from *Pictures* and the 1976 *Torse* included in the BAMEvent on Program B. *Installation*, to Timpin's gently odd assemblage of real sounds, freezes the dancers in tableaux reminiscent of the haunting designs in *Pictures* (they're related also to the black-and-white images of faces and bodies that Ellior Caplan spreads over three separate stacks of video monitors). The spurring, tilted, flattened-out leaps and hops that fill *Torse*

means that's what they're doing. And it joins our insides. In a duet from *Paint in Space*, Steele spins and falls repeatedly backward into Thomas Caley's arms, and our hearts stop. Not Romeo catching Juliet, but something both deeper and more particular. The earth moving, if you like.

This world is made visible by the extraordinary dancers with their tireless jumping, their high-IQ limbs, and the formidable control of dynamics that enables them to go from utter stillness to full-throttle motion without apparent preparation. Farmer and Maydelle Pason are valuable new recruits, and long-limbed Derry Swan is already beautifully at home in the dancing. Lisa Boudreau and Jared Phillips have suddenly come into focus in the repertory, Phillips looking as if his legs and his daring have grown a yard. Cunningham is no longer dancing, but others dancing his solos in excerpts from older works seem suddenly enlarged by his shadow: Phillips, Caley, d'Immobilité. But d'Immobilité (once known as Frédéric Gafner) is always astounding; among all the phenomenal dancers, he is unique in

dance

Brit Pack

British dance may be more prone to drama than its American counterpart, but the expressionist excesses of the Continent are as much a no-no in London as they'd be in New York. Diverse London artists visit Manhattan during Dancing in the Isles, a multiveneue, three-week event opening October 23. Siobhan Davies, celebrating 25 years of dance making, is by far the most senior. An abstractionist with soul, she relishes intimate collaborations with composers and designers. Her work gleams; subterranean passions smolder under cool surface sheen. Jonathan Burrows, a former Royal Ballet dancer, has evolved into a hard-edged, uncompromising choreographer. Analytical yet mesmerizing, he's a Lucinda Childs soul mate.

Wendy Houstoun is a motor-
elegant Russian *ballerina*—one of those dreamy dancers you'd be happy to watch doing nothing more than a warm-up; his *Unspoken*, a duet with the equally exceptional James DeMaria, mixes capoeira with contact improv.

Most intriguing of all is Javier De Frutos, originally from Venezuela; he danced with Laura Dean and has spent the past four seasons astounding London audiences with gutsy, giddy, in-your-face solos performed nude. Two of his fully-clothed group works (performed by Ricochet, a rep quintet poised on the cusp of major success) open the festival at Danspace St. Mark's. To Stravinsky's powerhouse cantata *Les Noces* he's set the stunning *All Visitors Bring Happiness, Some by Coming, Some by Going*. De Frutos creates a tense world where unbridled passion reveals itself as simultaneously irresistible and life-threateningly dangerous. His choreography matches the music with a ferocious, daredevil velocity that nearly immolates its performers, yet he accomplishes this without exploiting his dancers or diluting his ideas into self-indulgent, Eurocrash clichés.

—ALLEN ROBERTSON

For full festival information call 226-2000 ext. 302.