

Interview With Robert Swinston (2002)

A.S. Bessa

A.S.Bessa When I saw you dance "RainForest" last year I thought you had an understanding of the piece that most younger dancers, as good as their technique might be, are not able to show. Do you think that your work in reconstructing Merce's choreographies is helpful in this sense? Does it give you a better understanding of its inner structure?

Robert Swinston I had the experience of dancing RainForest in the 1980's when Merce reconstructed it for the company. I don't really think I understood it, and I was working mostly instinctually. My background in modern dance was in the Graham idiom. I worked for 10 years with a choreographer, Kazuko Hirabayashi, whom I first met when I was a very young dancer with the Martha Graham Apprentice Company in 1972 where she was the rehearsal director. She choreographed pure dances as well as dramatic works such as "In a Dark Grove" which was based on the Rashomon story by Akutagawa. I also went to the Juilliard where I worked for two years with Anna Sokolow, whose fierce commitment to being truthful in one's expression reinforced the Graham principle, where the body never lies. I also studied Jose Limon's work and danced in his company for two years, where I had the opportunity to be coached by Lucas Hoving in his roles, most notably as Iago in "The Moor's Pavane". This was my background before joining the Cunningham Company in 1980. I still believe that Dance is a language, and no matter how abstract, the dancer intention must be clear. Specifically the dancer means what he says, regardless of the sense it makes.

I was fortunate to see Merce dance in the 1970's before I joined his company. I was profoundly moved by his performance in "Sounddance". When I became a member of his group he was still very active on stage and we danced as a company being led, inspired and charged by this great dancer and artist. Beyond the concepts and abstraction of his choreography, there was the rigorous physicality of the movement and the vitality of human passion. His own example was what I followed and tried to learn from - notably his alertness, focus and wit. I was allowed to dance his roles in "Septet", RainForest" and "Sounddance", the last being my greatest thrill. Now I am trying to dance his role in "How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run", which I have had a large part in its reconstruction. There are new challenges here. In reconstructing the dances, I research the earliest documents I can find and try to understand why and where changes were made and how the work evolved. Then I try to return to the root of the movement and rhythmic ideas and meld them with the changes that Merce has made over time. He works alongside this process and is very helpful. It goes without saying that I have some understanding of the inner structures of his dances, surely because I watch them so much.

In dancing RainForest I do use my imagination and feel a sense of character. I have done visualizations and sometimes I imagine specific things to help create and reinforce my intentions. Otherwise, I do as I have observed Merce do all these years - allow myself to be primal as a dance animal.

ASB So you do see characters in his dances? That somehow surprises me. I am always amazed by the pure beauty of the movement and although sometimes I might fantasize a bit of a plot or characters, at the end everything is swept away and become abstract again. It always struck me the dancers' ability to memorize all the steps in a particular dance. Does the visualization help you memorize the choreography?

RS I don't want you to get the wrong impression, the characterizations that I talked about concerning RainForest are abstract and may be aided with animal imagery. The images are personal, may be specific for each occasion and can change. This is not to say that there are specific characters in his dances. One of the main reasons I grew tired of the dramatic work of Martha Graham and of Jose Limon was that their dances were programmatic and tied so specifically to a narrative with causal relationships, meanings tied to literary subjects, and movement phrases made in accordance to musical phrases. It began to seem so predictable to me. With such specific characterizations being linked to such grandiose subjects, I felt that it left little room for a dancer to develop as him/herself.

I was attracted to Merce's work because there was that openness in perception that you refer to. The dancer can explore the movement without being encumbered by reference. He must depend on himself to dance without the aid of story and music. He has to work at making the movement speak on its own terms. The audience can allocate meaning if they wish or if they are inclined, but any meaning is subjective and comes from the audience member's own storehouse of imagery. As Duchamp said, "The audience completes the performance." This is very liberating. It is also possible that there is no specific meaning intended at all in the dance. Of course, there is exhilaration, passion and struggle in dancing. In Merce's roles that were created earlier in his choreographic career, it was quite common that one had difficulty determining the actual steps he was doing, so quicksilver was his attack and fluid his movement. He was the character, sometimes grand and formal yet other times witty and mischievous. In work created later in his dancing career, he was the leader who charged his group of young dancers. All in all, he was always the catalyst who sparked and sparkled. When a young dancer is privileged to inherit one of these roles, he learns only the movements and is directed very little with specific references. However, we all know that Merce is fascinated by animals and their movements, so consequently we look there for help with imagery. It is not

essential though, and dynamic tensions and textures can be created without their aid. One matures as one ages and the process of working with one's limitations can be useful in personalizing one's dancing. I remember the line of W. B. Yeats; "Decrepitude is wisdom." I have always looked to Merce as an example. In dances like "Squaregame," "Exchange," "Quartet," "Pictures" and "Fabrications" from the 70's and 80's, Merce spoke with his dancing despite the wearing down of his body. This was a great reinforcing principle. The effort and necessity came across the stage through his command and focus. I am sure he had something going on in his mind, but it doesn't matter what it was, because it spoke volumes.

In many of his dances Merce works though formal design and structures. They are often created through chance operations and are not always organic and causal. In other words one movement rarely follows another in a natural flowing relationship. It requires great patience and many repetitions for a dancer to physically memorize the juxtapositions of legs, torso and arms. In fact his work has become more complicated than ever. However, due to the nature of our practice, we endeavor to make the sequences as seamless as possible. Hopefully, the movement becomes the metaphor.

ASB How were you be able to make the transition from that kind of narrative based choreography into Merce's method? I imagine that it might have implied in a de-conditioning first followed by an entirely new education, no? Did you embrace the idea of chance right away as a valid way to go about constructing dance, or for you was more like Merce's personal little quirk that really did not matter?

RS When I joined the Cunningham Company in August 1980, I learned 6 dances in 2 weeks off a reel to reel video machine that I was sharing with another new dancer learning her parts at the same time. The company was on a break and the machine was in the large studio next to Merce's desk,

where he sat. I was learning steps and I was learning the dance technique at the same time. There was a lot to learn and memorize so I didn't have much time to reflect on the difference between narrative and abstract dances. At their root, all dances are composed of steps and movements. There was no need to qualify them yet. I was so excited that I am sure I did them all with the same force. Merce had advised me that because the movements were different from what I was used to, I should simply try to make them kinesthetic. The first realization I had was the independent nature of this material in regard to music. For so long, I had been used to dancing with and to music. Now I was to discover that the movement should stand on its own accord, and more importantly that I should be self-reliant as a dancer in time and space. That meant I had to become clearer in my movements than ever before. I had to depend on myself and watch those with whom I was dancing rather than listening for musical cues. It took me awhile to realize that I didn't need to put the same attack or energy into every movement. A fellow dancer, Chris Komar, whom I respected and was Merce's assistant, helped me realize this. But also, it became a matter of physical survival. I learned that if I approached each and every movement with the same intensity, I would soon be exhausted, which I sometimes was. I had to learn that sometimes I needed to turn the volume down and find the ease. So in a sense there was a great deal of deconditioning. I remember one dancer telling me as I came offstage, "Swinston, this isn't the Graham Company". However, I always believed that the dances had a content. I could still approach it as a language where one says what they mean and mean what they say, no matter what that meaning was, even if it was nonsense or had no literal meaning. I watched others, but I was really allowed to develop without much strict direction, as is usually the case here. For the first 6 months or so, Merce would pay specific attention to what I was doing in the rehearsal and made corrections. It seemed to me that he didn't really trust what I was doing. I remember working hard not to make mistakes in order that he wouldn't notice me. After this period he basically let me alone. When we would perform, however, I would watch Merce dancing on stage. He filled

his movement with commitment and passion but also with wit and charm. It meant something to him. I soon realized that it was ok for me to be myself, and to include what I already had acquired from my past experience in my dancing. This offered even more freedom and gave me confidence that I was ok. I had worried for quite awhile that I would stick out, but sometimes I received compliments that there was something Mercian about me because of my Graham background.

ASB What about the use of chance as a method? Do you share Merce's philosophical ideas?

RS I had studied music at Middlebury College in 1968 with a teacher who was influenced by John Cage. We used to create sound environments in the music building. I also studied with a Classics professor who devoted time to the principals of Buckminster Fuller. The ideas of "Happenings" were in the air at this time. Even if I could not relate these new ideas directly to Merce, they became part of my consciousness. I used to throw the I Ching, not as a tool for creativity like Cage and Cunningham but as a means to tap into the universal flux. When I became a part of this artistic family, I understood and welcomed the idea of chance and change. What I have learned after was the importance of structural elements that guide the freedom of flux.

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