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A Movement, a Sound, a Change of Light

By John Cage

The development of theatre-dance in America has followed two paths, that of the ballet and that of the “modern” dance. The modern dance differs from the ballet in that it uses the full body and, rather than holding a traditional approach, favors experiment, research, and discovery. Its first exponents in America were Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn. Their followers were, principally, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm, who, having come from Germany brought to America influences of Mary Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg, and others.

Where, for subject matter, the ballet had, for the most part, told the story of the prince and the princess, the modern dance generally employed contemporary concerns, social or individual. When either the ballet, as in many works of George Balanchine, or the modern dance was “pure” or “abstract,” it was so as a relatively exact visualization of the music employed.

Merce Cunningham, who was for several years on the one hand a soloist in the company of Martha Graham and, on the other hand, a member of the faculty of the School of American Ballet, has, since 1944, developed his own school of dancing and choreography, the continuity of which no longer relies on linear elements, be they narrative or psychological, nor does it rely on a movement towards and away from a climax. As in abstract painting, it is assumed that an element (a movement, a sound, a change of light) is in and of itself expressive; what it communicates is in large part determined by the observer himself. It is assumed that the dance supports itself and does not need support from the music. The two arts take place in a common place and time, but each art expresses this Space-Time in its own way. The result is an activity of interpenetrations in time and space, not counterpoints, nor controlled relationships, but flexibilities as are known from the mobiles of Alexander Calder. By not relying on psychology, the “modern” dance is free from the concerns of most such dancing. What comes through, though different for each observer, is clear (since one can only approach it directly - not through an idea of something else than itself), brilliant (the dancers can actually move physically, and they do not cover themselves with disguising costumes), and serene (the absence of an emotionally-driven continuity brings about an overall sense of tranquility, illuminated from reactions, heroic, mirthful, wondrous, erotic, fearful, disgusting, sorrowful, and angry; these eight emotions, those considered, with tranquility, the permanent ones by Indian tradition, appear thus kaleidoscopically in this choreography). As for the individual movements, they are both derived and discovered; in being derived they stem as much from the ballet as from the modern dance; in being discovered they represent the findings of Cunningham himself, who has constantly searched and refined his sense of movement.

Where other music and dance generally attempt to “say” something, this theater is one that “presents” activity. This can be said to affirm life, to introduce an

audience, not to a specialized world of art, but to the open, unpredictably changing world of everyday living.