

DANCE

Designs On Dance

Leningrad artist Afrika is creating the look for Merce Cunningham's season

By Amei Wallach

HE CALLS HIMSELF Afrika. He looks like a young Nureyev, and he thinks like a young Rauschenberg.

He's sloe-eyed, with a blond page-boy and super-economy-size lips, and a walk down Manhattan streets with him is a stop-and-go exercise in elated discovery.

His real name is Sergei Bugnev. He's an artist, lives in Leningrad, and will be 24 on March 26. Afrika wears an insouciant air that would look Downtown in any city, but he's young enough to make a point of that birthday: the last one he says lasted 48 hours, because it started in Los Angeles and traveled east.

The last one occurred on his first trip to America. He had a visa for Los Angeles and Boston, not New York, but he got here anyway. And it says almost everything about Afrika that within hours of his arrival he was visiting with Merce Cunningham and John Cage, and not too long after that he had a commission to do sets and costumes for a new Cunningham dance.

"August Pace" opens the Merce Cunningham Dance Company season at City Center Tuesday, with Afrika's adornments. It's one of three works new to New York that Cunningham, the 70-year-old father of dance-as-pure-movement, will present during his company's two-week season. Last week he broke from rehearsal to talk about Afrika and his ongoing relationship with artists inspired enough to design for the dance.

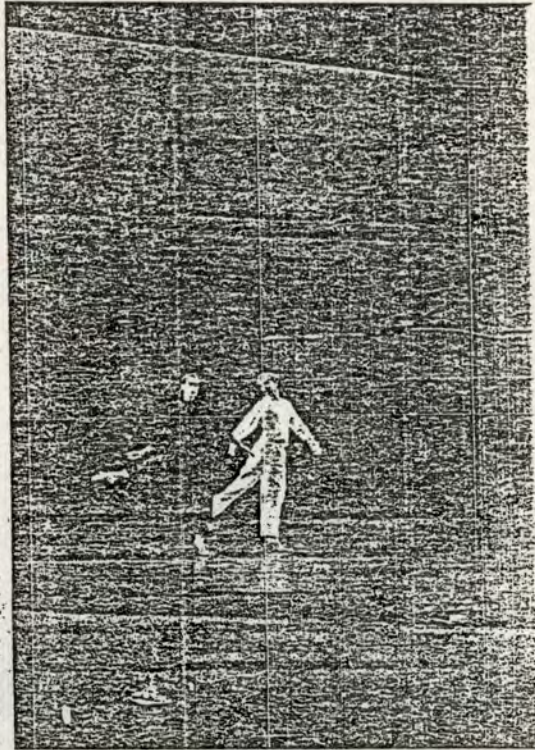
"I make steps," Cunningham explained, "so if there's a free moment I make some steps and I try them out on dancers in class." The steps he has been making for 40 years are a rule unto themselves, building into formal dances by accretion rather than grand design. Music — or sound, most likely in the John Cage tradition — is independent enhancement. Sets and costumes too have lives of their own, parallel to the dance and, at their best, intersecting with it in a manner that makes magic of both.

The artists who have best understood this are the ones who grew up with the Cunningham company — Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol. Rauschenberg in particular traveled with the dancers in a Volkswagen bus in the '60s and often performed onstage. Cunningham sees Afrika, too, as a performance artist. But he thinks the days when an artist could travel with the company are long gone.

"It's become so difficult to travel," he said. "With the Volkswagen everything was in it and we were in it," he said. "Now we're there and the freight comes another way and you're never sure whether it will get there."

It's harder to get painters to work in the dance these days, he says, because it's become so complicated. "I like working with artists, but it's not easy" said Cunningham. "And I don't mean because they are difficult. Artists who aren't used to working in the theater are put off by having to get someone else to make drops for them. I don't blame them. What you do when you are an artist is you make things. You do it. You don't let other people do it."

In fact, Afrika is one of a number of artists who don't believe they have to do it themselves. In the Soviet Union as in this country, such artists call themselves conceptual artists. They come up with the



Merce Cunningham's 'August Pace' features Afrika's sets and costumes; the season

idea. Afrika once came up with the idea for making a series of abstract paintings that were executed by the "people who used to paint agitprop billboards." People like that are out of work under perestroika, "so my artist friend Anufriev and I put them to work making modern art, and we just stood there and watched," said Afrika. "The people did great things with great feeling."

The sets and costumes he made for "August Pace" are also in the manner of such an experiment. Once back in Moscow last winter he couldn't decide what to do, until he received a telegram from the Cunningham company instructing him to make costumes for seven men and eight women.

A friend of his was going to New York the next day, so Afrika stayed up all night and, using the look and wording of the telegram as inspiration, designed white costumes with black squares at the chest for the men, black costumes with white squares for the women, and one costume split down the middle black and white for the extra woman. "It is from Malevich," he said, citing the hero of Russian modernism.

He made his sketches on what Cunningham characterizes as "old wallpaper," and some of the ink bled through. He also enclosed a kind of equivalency table, which equated the number on each costume with an object: One equals sun, two equals apple, three equals cherries. It was then up to Cunningham designers and John Cage to translate what Afrika had sent them into a set.

Behind the dancers in black and white hangs a backdrop with faint black markings, and off to the right are the drawings of the numbers and their brightly colored object equivalents in two vertical

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Cunningham

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The sets and costumes give the dance an air of arcane child's play. But then Afrika says the art that intrigues him most "looks like nothing at first."
He's a decidedly odd duck, so clever at art politics, and yet he has chosen to eschew the gallery system his fellow Russian artists crave. He lets a low-key entrepreneur named Paul Judelson handle his affairs in New York and show his work in a few floors of a small apartment house at 314 E. 51st St.
"Art politics is a very simple thing," Afrika says. "We grew up in a very very dangerous time in Leningrad. We had difficulty with the union of artists and the KGB. It is very good to grow up in that way. It is an immunization."

ACTUALLY, he grew up in the Black Sea port of Odessa, where his father paints decorative stencils on building walls. "He is always drunk," says Afrika, who declines to explain the derivation of his nickname. "He is a typical Soviet working-class person." His mother cooks in a restaurant, and when he played sick rather than be drafted into the army that was invading Afghanistan, she supported him. She told army psychiatrists that her son was crazy, "and when she showed them my art they agreed that I was crazy," he says. He was 17 when he moved to Leningrad and immediately joined the artistic underground.

Friends of his spotted John Cage on the street two years ago when Cage arrived to perform a concert in Leningrad, and they brought him to Afrika's studio. Cage liked his paintings. And now the young man is in New York to see what the old master Cunningham has wrought with his work. And perhaps, if he is lucky, to learn a great deal from him.

"I just go on making pieces," says Cunningham. "I have struggles with this one, and when it comes out I go on to the next. Oh, you can get tired. But I think there is always something else — not necessarily that I'll find it. But if you keep looking, maybe you'll find something." / 11

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