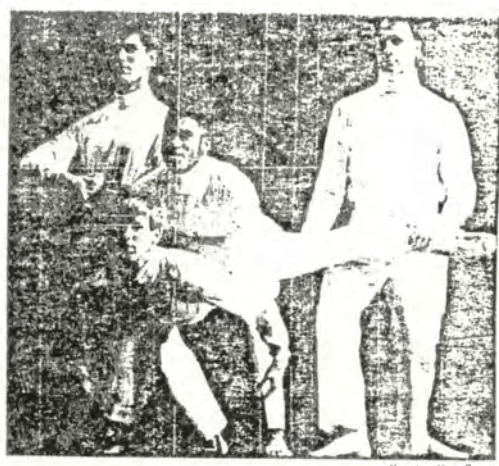


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'August Pace' runs through March 25 at City Center

Cunningham's 'August Pace'

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY. "August Pace" (New York premiere), "Fabrications," "Cargo X," all choreographed by Merce Cunningham. Tuesday night at City Center. Varied repertory through March 25.

YOU CAN have almost as much fun thinking about the decor for "August Pace" as you can watching the dancing. The designer of the piece, Afrika (a 23-year-old artist from Leningrad whose real name is Sergoi Bugaev), was inspired by the look of the telegram sent to him in Russia that told him to make costumes for eight women and seven men. The next day, he sent his designs to the States with a friend. There were black costumes and white costumes, each with a numbered square, and there was a list where each number corresponded to an object.

And so here are these dancers: Some wear all black and some wear all white and one woman wears half-black and half-white. The double rank of numbers and pictures behind the dancers look charming and childlike, or, less politely, as if anyone could have painted them: a rocket ship, a mushroom, two cherries, a sun, a flower, a dragonfly, and on and on.

The dancers, fortunately, resemble none of these. Again, Cunningham has tricked us into making connections where none exist. Neither the electronic score (Michael Pugliese's "Peace Talks") nor the decor is connected to the choreography, even though sometimes it may feel that way.

There is a change, however: The dancers are identifiable by the numbers on their backs, which is a dance critic's dream.

"August Pace" is a fast exuberant one that shows off the virtuosity of the company, perhaps the most elegant and most technically proficient of all the modern, barefoot troupes. The score, an unusual, chattering combination of plinks and zloops and clicks, is tight, close and agitated, but the way the dancers move, with surety and elation, provides a sense of openness. In all, "August Pace" is one of Cunningham's most gorgeous pieces.

Here are Victoria Finlayson and Robert Swinston (numbers 4 and 1), essaying the loveliest and most generous of leaps in the first of what will be a succession of duets. They're succeeded by Emma Diamond and Randal Sanderson (numbers 6 and 3), who

are followed by a trio (and at this point, we're looking at the dazzling footwork, not the prosaic numbers) doing a nifty little barefoot combination of *passee/echappe*, moving off two feet (each) to one foot to a wide jump. A company newcomer, Michael Cole, dancing with Larissa McGoldrick, had beautifully elevated leaps and an all-encompassing sense of energy.

Alan Good supports Patricia Lent by an elbow as she rises and falls with perfect composure; a foursome arrives to watch them. They cluster in front of Afrika's art, and the curtain falls.

The other fine dancers were Carol Teitelbaum, David Kulick, Kimberly Bartosik, Chris Komar, Helen Barrow, and Rob Wood.

Cunningham, 72, was part of the elegaic, enigmatic "Fabrications" (1987), stepping forward and back in a crabbed fashion, hobbled by arthritis but infusing every move with undeniable force. When he's onstage, it's hard to watch any body else. //



Janice Berman