

Review/Dance

Merce Cunningham Asks Questions in a Premiere

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

A great deal of activity always takes place within Merce Cunningham's dance pieces although very little of it is meant to be tangible or comprehensible in a narrative sense.

The premiere that opened the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's two-week season on Tuesday night at the City Center (131 West 55th Street) was "August Pace," as creative an exercise in dissociation as the choreographer has recently produced. In fact, the intriguing vibrancy of this work's very look and sound lies directly in the questions it raises but does not answer.

The décor, for instance, obviously means something more specific to its artist than the audience. Sergei Bujayev, who signs himself *Afrika*, has designed a backdrop with smidgens of Soviet postmarks along a blank beige area balanced on the other side by two vertical rows of numbers. Rows of rebus-like designs (missiles, mushrooms, fruit) run parallel to the lines of numbers.

The Soviet allusions may be irrelevant to the dancing but numbers do play a major nonsense role in "August Pace." Each of the eight women and seven men (some of the dancers are new) wears a number pinned to his or her back. Marathon-dance contestants of the 1930's or marathon runners of today? Neither.

The numbers worn by the performers have nothing to do with the order of their appearance, and when the choreographic structure turns into a series of seven duets, there is no point in trying to match one partner's number with another's. But the guessing game is part of the fun.

Movement material is, of course, what "August Pace" is really about. More than some other Cunningham pieces, it has the dancers striking up a clearly outlined position and then holding it. The emphasis is on the hold.

Yet the sound of the piece is anything but tranquil. Michael Pugliese's score "Peace Talks" is mainly percussion. The vivid drumming, especially when it escalates, permeates the entire theater. Whether the audience will hear the same sound every time in "August Pace" is debatable in the Cunningham canon, and

whether the percussion is electronically produced or live makes no difference as it sounds electronic by the time it comes out of the amplifiers.

The costumes also set up a series of questions that can mislead. All the dancers wear turtle-necks and loose pants. The men are in white, and the women are in black except for Jenifer Weaver, who is bisected by a black-white costume.

Hermaphroditism is not the subject, of course. More to the point is Mr. Cunningham's interest in new ways of partnering, especially duets full of risks and astonishing shapes. The dancers are superb here, all the more so because they are not dancing to music but must keep an internal count so as to deliver the acute timing such duets require.

Much of recent Cunningham choreography has a plumb-line look symbolized by the arabesque he invented. Unlike a ballet dancer, the Cunningham dancer twists his or her torso into a flattened placement. The sup-

porting leg is seen behind an arm on the same side that hangs down like, in effect, a plumb line. The other arm is raised.

In "August Pace" that line is the point of reference, but it is constantly broken by tilted heads and tilted bodies that burst out of the dancing.

As hard as it may be to grab a handle on Mr. Cunningham's pieces, he has always defined each work with choreographic themes. It is not surprising to see complex variations on the opening image — Miss Weaver lying laterally across the laps of three men. A more lyric variant recurs later in a duet.

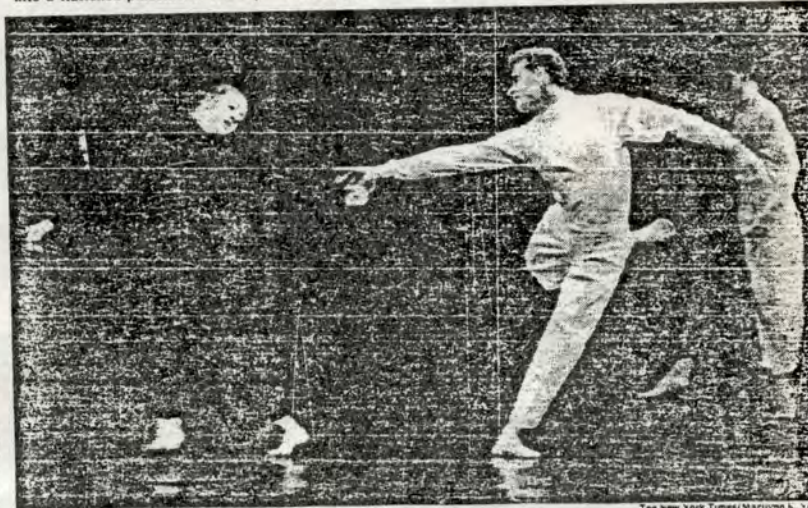
The first in the series has Robert Swinston and Victoria Finlayson, leaning, pulling, twisting, with Emma Diamond adding a wiggle, and Randall Sanderson, a newcomer (with Miss Weaver and Michael Cole), preceding Carol Teitelbaum and David Kulick, who stress support and wide swings of the leg. Kimberly Bartosik begins with little jumps, but her

encounter with Chris Komar is a major duet, full of physical risk.

All the while, the stage is filled with passing incidents around the duets. Larissa McGoldrick and Mr. Cole (executing strangely shaped *pas de deux*), who have passed through early in the piece, for instance, must wait until Heien Barrow and Robert Wood spring up and then dance lyrically to what sounds like an Indian *veena*.

Patricia Lent and Alan Good dance the final duet, marked by strong tilts and falls. They end the piece, looking unaware of four dancers who stand in the rear after having slowly plowed in — like August's pace.

Mr. Cunningham, still the company's strongest presence despite the limitations age has placed on his dancing, walked through and looked philosophically apt in his 1987 "Fabrications." Almost romantic in atmosphere, the work was danced with a special clarity, as was last year's "Cargo X," in which Miss Weaver's power was amazing.



Kimberly Bartosik and Chris Komar performing in Merce Cunningham's "August Pace."

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