

It's impossible to repossess . . .

by Paula Clements

It's impossible to repossess time and figure out exactly who spawned what, or where and when particular influences were felt by whom. No doubt those chronological details, if agreed upon, would be buried under the indisputable fact that a group of people were busy in Robert Dunn's composition class and subsequently showed some of their dances at Judson Memorial Church on July 6, 1962. They kept working, kept showing, and twenty years went by.

All four nights of the Judson Dance Theater Reconstructions were completely sold out and throughout both Program A and B (two nights of each), the audience was enthusiastic and appreciative. Not only were dances being restored but it seemed that the audience was being reconstructed as well. Peter Moore, who had taken thousands of photographs of the original performances, was back with his tripod and camera, and the pre-performance excitement was unlike today's sedate dance concert atmosphere. Maybe people were there for the opportunity of witnessing a refraction of the course of dance history. Or maybe the 1982 audience had arrived with a hunger for the fresh and innovative forces that had been set loose twenty years ago and a secret hope that some part of it might still be potent and contagious. Whatever the reasons, the audience was delighted and enthralled, perhaps more patient and ready to indulge the past-excesses and whims that they might not tolerate in present performances.

Judson Dance Theater entered history almost immediately. Jill Johnston was an integral, if extended, member of the Judson community. Her regular reviews of the performances were invigorating pieces of criticism that paralleled the shifts in perspective that were developing so quickly. A sentence like, "Finally she caps this perfect and meticulous nonsense with a meaningless assault on a blue plastic bag," would normally be a negative dismissal of work, in this case Lucinda Childs' *Carnation*. But Johnston uses a reviewer's tone of pronouncement to reverse the negation and not only commend but extend an understanding of a new viewpoint—that meticulous nonsense does not have to be incomprehensible; it can even be "perfect."

There's something both ironic and fitting that innovative dance should find a home in churches. The Reconstructions were co-sponsored by the Bennington College Judson Project and by The Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church. The main sanctuary (renovations were completed there just in time for the performances) was a surprisingly apt site for many of the dances. By coincidence, the only other event in the new sanctuary to precede the Judson show was an Easter service to commemorate The Resurrection.

In Elaine Summers' *Dance for Lots of People*, the group of more than forty participants often moved as if by a shared religious fervor. By reaching arms upward in a closely huddled throng, or moving through the room

en masse, or joining hands in a long chain, they evoked an unwavering sense of communal faith.

As required for Remy Charlip's *Meditation*, everyone sitting on either side of the sanctuary moved down onto the large, main floor, spreading out like a congregation before the altar. With this expanse of people gazing up at him, Charlip's gestural skills were amplified. Like a seasoned preacher, he seemed able to orchestrate the audience's response.

Philip Corner's *Keyboard Dances* were like a subdued ceremony. His elaborate preparations of removing shoes and socks, and getting perfectly settled on the piano bench, were necessary to play a sequence of notes with his feet. Near the end of his performance there was a beautiful image of Corner crouched at one end of the piano with his arms extending over the entire keyboard, touching every key.

The photograph on the cover of the Reconstruction program notes shows attentive audience members at a Happening in the sixties. One can pick out John Cage in the midst of the group with an appreciative smile on his face.

Program:



Happenings audience, 1960

photo: Robert McElroy

Other faces in the vicinity reflect almost identical responses. The expressions reveal not so much rollicking humor, but a deeper funniness. It is made in part of pure hilarity and checked in part by the smiling acknowledgement of a troubling question.

Meditations made people laugh at their own expectations. Because Remy Charlip was dressed in black and began with lofty arm gestures and a pensive face, the tone was set for a serious dance. People laughed in response to his ability to handle time and gesture, interspersing the serious manner with loony, anguished, bored, or earnest expressions. It was like being held captive and tickled relentlessly.

Lucinda Childs is notorious for her cool sense of precision. Her dances run like unerring clock mechanisms. In *Carnation*, the precision is directed toward a series of mundane but colourful chores. Her secretarial approach towards an assortment of sponges is very funny. At the outset, you know you are being set up for some absurd situation, but you become involved in the eloquence of her activity as she plucks pink curlers from her collander hat and squeezes them between half a dozen flat sponges which are held in

place by her teeth. She drops the sponges from her mouth into a plastic bag (in which her lower leg is encased) and abandons this meaningless business which we have sat on the edge of our seats to watch.

One of the most exciting rediscoveries made in the sixties was that dance is a "visual" art. A new awareness of seeing movement was instilled. At the heart of Judson were dancers, people with a deep empathy for the human body. All the breakthroughs concerning methods, presentation, use of objects and tasks, all the formal and emotional reasons why and where a dance takes place, were ultimately rudimentary to the less easily described developments and breakthroughs of the physical movement of dance. It wasn't just new structures in which dance unfolded, but new threads within the movement itself. After bypassing many conventions of dance, the work during the early years of Judson pared movement down to essentials and led the way to new movement invention.

In her book, *Work 1961-73*, Yvonne Rainer described a period of time in Dusseldorf where she went to an empty ballet school every day. "Since there

was nothing else to do I worked on movement. It was necessary to find a different way to move." Rainer found that the energy of dancing was one of the most deceptive and ingrained elements used in choreography.

Trio A, performed by Rainer at the Reconstruction, looked as significant a milestone as it is reported to be in the annals of contemporary dance. In a way, it was the simplest dance on the program; no costume, prop, or music (also true of Steve Paxton's dance). The movement seemed to materialize in an independent space with no distractions. The world became invisible with nothing there but someone dancing, making visible exactly what her body was doing. One thing followed another. Very simple. "Why are we moved so strongly and so strangely by certain simple groupings of a few ordinary words." By replacing "a few ordinary words" with "a few ordinary movements," this quote from Frederick Schiller applies well to *Trio A*.

Judith Dunn, whom John Herbert McDowell once spoke of as "one of the greatest dancers in the Western world," made dances in which the movement created elaborate stories of a non-narrative nature. In *Devhorse* (danced by Cheryl Lilienstein), my focus was drawn to the expressiveness of details and small isolated movements. While music was often used for particular effect in many Judson pieces, Dunn's work with trumpet-player Bill Dixon was an extended inquiry into the face to face relationship between music and dance, dancer and musician.

Aileen Passloff, who inspired many with an unabashed sense of her own style, performed at the Reconstruction in both James Waring's *Octandre* and her own *Structures*. In both works she danced in a world that appeared to exist because of the dynamic play between movement that had its own vitality, and movement that became animated by her. Like others, she had an interest in what effect her presence had on movement.

The inheritance of dance is obviously more than a certain number of pieces in various repertoires; it is also the conveying of techniques and movement awareness. There was something very satisfying about seeing dancers in their twenties dancing in twenty-year-old dances, especially since most of these young dancers have been informed by movement concepts that have evolved from the germinal work of Judson Dance Theater. When Stephen Petronio and Randy Warshaw danced in an excerpt from Steve Paxton's

JUDSON DANCE THEATER

RECONSTRUCTIONS



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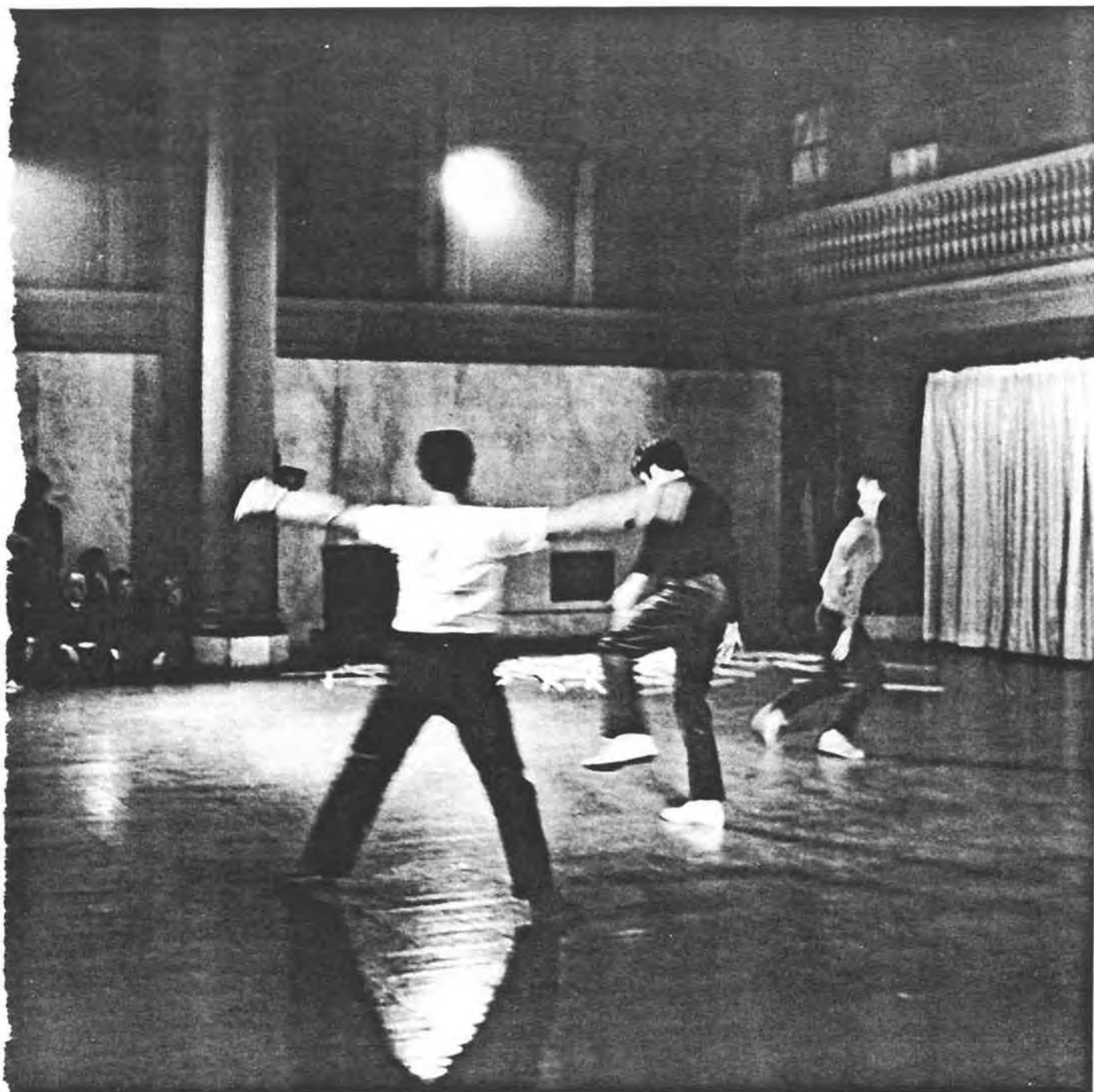


photo: Peter Moore © 1966

These [Reconstruction] concerts have struck this city at a particularly fortuitous moment; the energy piling up in the dance community behind the nuclear disarmament issue is beginning to create a social climate not unlike the communitarian sixties, when the peace and civil rights movements made mass energy make political sense.

Elizabeth Zimmer, WBAI, 4/16/82

Seeing Judith Dunn's Dewhorse was stirring in that she was an important teacher for me and many others. Cheryl Niederman Lilienstein strongly evoked Judith's noble and idiosyncratic stance. Cheryl said that doing the dance was like presenting the life habits of an unfamiliar and beautiful creature.

Lisa Kraus

Dewhorse was danced by Cheryl Lilienstein. Cheryl danced with Judith Dunn for several years until Judith, falling ill, retired. For Cheryl, it was certainly a charged situation. Judith sat intently in a wheel chair, and those of us who saw her original performances were scattered through the audience. Cheryl had reconstructed the dance from a crummy videotape, and a little work with a colleague who had learned the dance many years ago.

What one might fear from the situation, an empty homage of clone-dance, perhaps, or a feeling of removal from the source, were quite absent. Cheryl does, in dance, resemble Judith, but remains very much herself. I thought her performance was uncanny, and something of a triumph.

Lucinda Childs, performing her own *Carnation*, was interesting because she performs differently in 1982 than in 1964. *Carnation* is a dance in, say, 4 sections. The first part occurs at a table; the second, upside-down. The third lying down; and the fourth, on a repeated diagonal pass. At the table, she performs a serial transformation of 20 sponges, a collander, and herself, in which the objects become mathematical entities and she becomes a carnation. A hint of the '80s performance attitude was visible here, though this section is so programmatic that performance attitude is difficult to pin down.

Section 2 has rigors of another sort. At the end of section 3, however, a cloth is folded, and I felt it was being folded by a performing persona rather than by a person.

What is that difference? Well, Lucinda was once the coolest of performers. There was little hint of any attitude visible, and the feeling of an observer was less attached, as I remember. Her pacing was smooth, the transitions casual, and preparations were unselfconscious, though deliberate.

The folding used to happen like that. Now, very delicately, each action has a certain stressing. Gestures are slightly telegraphed, augmented by an intense concentration around her upper spine and arms.

In a reserved manner, *Carnation* is a madcap composition. Upon detecting the new interpretation, I was curious how the fourth section would be treated. In this, Lucinda gives herself a difficult task. She attempts to cry each time she steps on a plastic bag.

The whole section is made addressing that bag, but formerly this was revealed in the course of action only—now, the preparation becomes an event in itself. We see her think about the bag, see her twitching in readiness. She crosses and stands on the bag. Her eyes roam the audience before her. A certain humor passes behind her eyes. Then she does whatever she does to change mood, and her humor fades, collapses; her face cracks. Instantly she is off the bag, regarding it as she leaves—the look, I thought, of one wishing to convey surprise at the effect of the bag. She returns to the top of the diagonal. The pass is repeated, and preparation becomes more extravagant. During variations on this, the lights suddenly fade, leaving her on the bag.

The change in performance has an effect upon the dance. Formerly, section 4 focused on how quickly and completely Lucinda could change states. I used to feel the moment had some self-conscious irony for Lucinda. She had barely blinked on stage up to that time. Along with some solos by Yvonne Rainer, this was one of Judson's few forays into work with emotions.

Now, however, there is body-language amplification, precise little action punches, thought rubato, and double-takes; and, there is her carriage which unites the upper body and produces a presentational quality. The thoughts of carriage and the body language were slightly at odds in section 4. It moved the emphasis from what she was *doing* to what she was *going through*.

This raised a series of questions in my mind. Does she have to go through it, and it shows; or does she choose to go through it because she can now show it? I wondered if she was aware of this change, or alternately, if she had always *thought* this showed in section four, and finally the years have allowed it all to manifest. And there is the chance that she *did* perform the dance this way, and my memory is faulty.

Not an answerable question in the lot. Once memory is suspect, one might as well sit back and enjoy the dance . . . ; the notion of re-view is no longer an issue. However, if there has been a change, in my head or hers, the effect was comic. Lucinda was comic, and seemed to know it and know how to do it. And even so, it remained funny.

Carnation was always funny. Where

once it seemed programmatic and somewhat droll, now it is obsessive and wry. The humor is so specific to its internal workings that the fun of it doesn't fade.

Perhaps I am so interested in *Carnation*'s performance because there seemed to be some unspoken performance attitude at Judson which called for a deadpan facade. Cheryl Lilienstein retained that attitude in *Dewhorse*. Yvonne Rainer worked against the convention in *3 Seascapes* (not shown), throwing a screaming fit, and following that with a horizontal glance so controlled, so dignified, as to call one's memory of the earlier passage a lie.

In *Prairie*, Alex Hay maintained a straight face in absurdly straightened circumstances (this work was not Reconstructed). Trisha Brown, in the original *Trillium* (not shown), gave us no clue. Rainer once performed *Trio A* in blackface, attempting to neutralize her commanding presence—to no avail. Deborah Hay produced amazingly emotive movements in solo works but her face retained its mystery.

We were in a quandry. We needed a performing style to go with new work. Cunningham had copyright on the glassy stare. Graham and Limon produced a constant emotive action in the face, as did most of the drama of the day.

But our works were not dramas. They were pieces. They did not have narrative or emotional threads. It was inappropriate to amplify or produce one's inner remarks—it would signal extraneous material to the audience. Forms would be seen secondarily to familiar facial theater. So we tended to inhabit movement, but not animate it.

In many of the works depending upon choices by performers in the course of performance, absorption-in-process answered the quandry.

In *Ten*, Deborah Hay has three teams of performers, each to follow its leader in positions touching either a horizontal or vertical length of pipe. Loud music by a live band is played, making simple remarks by performers about specifics of the pose into inaudible shouts. They go about their task scattering images and echoes of images across the space. Visual rhythms are created, counterpoised, interspersed, and disbanded. Any facial energy re-