Judith Dunn, *Motorcycle*, Judson Church 1963.

detail of photo by Peter Moore © 1963.

Performance and the Reconstruction of Judson

by Steve Paxton

Judson Dance Theater had become a myth. That unwieldy accumulation of dancers, artists, poets and musicians of the early 1960s had reached the point of being a casual reference in conversations.

Judson Dance Theater Reconstructions at Danspace, St. Mark's Church, NYC, addressed the problem directly. Most of the work on the two programs presented April 15 & 16, 17 & 18 [1982], was from the early programs at Judson Memorial Church, and elsewhere.

The two programs comprised 5 hours of works lasting from 30 minutes to 4 minutes. There were 17 works, which seemed a substantial sample. In examining materials researched by Sally Banes for a forthcoming book, and the photos and interviews collected by Bennington College Judson Projected directed by Wendy Perron and Tony Carruthers, I was surprised to discover works, names and performances unknown to me. There were apparently about 35 'Judson' performances. The retrospective, drawing from this breadth of material, contained several items new to my eyes, and I felt at the same time expectancy and nostalgia.

The proceedings were informal; much like the originals. The refinished interior of St. Mark's is airy and elegant, unlike Judson Church, which was cavernous.

I wondered what the feelings of others presenting work were. I was interested in seeing works from different years on the same program. I was interested that at last I would see Simone Forti's work with Judson work; and I was very interested to see my own contribution. I had never seen it performed.

I performed it *[Jag Ville Gorna Telefonera]* once, in Sweden, 1964. Now, Stephen Petronio and Randy Warshaw were to perform it, basing their work on a score of pasted photographs.

It is the nature of many of the dances of that period to rely on choices by performers. The dances may exist as general instructions for activities, or a piece of equipment to be used, or a photoscore. They will reflect a different aspect of performers than does rote-learned movement. They are not intended to remain the 'same' from one performance to the next, let alone for 20 years. Yet, because they are generalities and include

change, they have a kind of structural immutability.

So showings of *Jag Ville*'s excerpt, *Lateral Splay* (Schneeman, 1963), *Dance for Lots of People* (Summers, 1963), *Ten* (D. Hay, 1967), and *Slant Board* (Forti, 1961) were as definitive as any.

However, *Carnation* (Childs, 1964), *Meditation* (Charlip, 1966), *Dewhorse* (Dunn, 1963), *Pop 1* and *Pop 2* (Bhartonn, 1963), *The mind is a muscle Part I, or Trio A* (Rainer, 1966), *Structures* (Passloff, 1960), and *Octandre* (Waring, 1957, revised 1958) are all more or less exactly the same as they have always been and so are more precisely different.

In these works only details can change. Excepting *Dewhorse* and *Octandre*, these fixed structures were performed by the choreographers. Here we see change in the artist—maturing sensibilities operating on the work of their youth.

And that is a fascinating thing to see. Whether one has seen the work before or not, it is an occasion. *Octandre* was performed by Aileen Passloff, and while she is physically very different than Waring, she danced with him and rendered his dance with understated, slightly fey grace.

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 clonedance, 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.

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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 doubletakes; 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.

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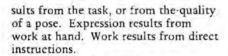
But our works were not dramas. They were pieces. They did not have narrative or emotional threads. It was inappropriate to amplify or produce one's inner remarks—it would signal extraneous material to the audience. Forms would be seen secondarily to familiar facial theater. So we tended to inhabit movement,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

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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-

Steve Paxton, *Afternoon*, with Yvonne Rainer, New Jersey 10/6/63

I wanted to see the abstracted face

of technical dance in a forest.

Here Yvonne Rainer has that face,

sort of.

Steve Paxton

sults from the task, or from the quality of a pose. Expression results from work at hand. Work results from direct instructions.

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Lateral Splay, by the look of it and on evidence of partial instructions published in the program, relates language to action in a slightly different way than *Ten*. *LS* seems to be founded on a list of movement possibilities and performance qualities. This procedure makes use of the ambiguity of terms relating to movement and performance. It leaves interpretation to the performers. I was interested to read that Carolee Schneeman had listed *stylized* and *severe* under the category of performance. I did see three movements which took people from place to place —a duckwalk, a run, and a backwards run with arms flailing. However, every performer produced variations, so I presume that it is a subjective stylization which is intended. Similarly, 'severe'. It seemed severe to me relative to carnival in Rio, but not in any objective sense.

Perhaps the word 'severe' takes some of the goofiness out of the situation. I can imagine a cast of *LS* having hysterics at some of the extraordinary events it seems to produce. Directors of indeterminant performances occasionally run into problems with giddiness when introducing performers to freedoms within the form. John Cage, rehearsing an orchestra new to his work, finally explained that freedom was to be used with dignity. A creative impulse is preferred to a referential one, and while the vast world of sound possibilities does include "Mairzy Doats," the idea of that vast world is not well conveyed by "Mairzy Doats,"

which, in the context of Cage's notion of freedom, smacks of adult play-school. Adults new to indeterminant performance frequently reach back into childhood for examples of free choice.

Dance for Lots of People began with lots of people dressed much like the audience. The lots embarked upon the floor turning individually and speaking. In this piece they were, I suppose, given instructions, and a lot of choices, such as where to go, when to speak, perhaps even what to say. The group evidently had a sequence to follow: all might speak in one section, people are lifted in another, and so forth. Soloists emerged and improvised in the spaces created by members of group, but it was the group action which held my eye. A gleam of personality, a fraction of body, a snatch of speech, created a sum of fragments; and when the group left, I had a sense of loss. All kinds of expressions happened in this dance, and some folk remained deadpan as well. I now see *LS* and *DfLoP* as explorations of performance—attempts to solve an artistic problem.

We tended to question and to answer according to our work, I suppose. Simone Forti had produced an answer before Judson Memorial Church hosted the Dance Theater. *Slant Board* and other dance constructions from her Chambers St. concert (1961) were a quite complete new performance statement. Works for groups were 10 minutes long, and each piece had a simple thing to *keep doing*.

Verbal instructions for these works could be minimal because there was no slack in the situation, once begun. Establishing this style in the perform-

ing context of the early '60s did present some challenge, as I recall. Simone told us (the initial cast) that she worked hard to have an idea and wanted to see those thoughts without other people's ideas mixing in. One might imagine that *Slant Board* was foolproof, but Simone's remark indicates that we were goofing on her material.

Her insistence on clearing ground was very important. It produced a shock to my system in performance. The effect of Simone's remark had been to make me eager to work with her idea and not my own. But upon the slant board or in the fountain of people, I noticed I was constantly making choices. There was no time to get out of my thought to explore hers. I grappled with this idea through the rehearsals. Then it was The Night. We were beginning *Slant Board* and my mind began to race, seeking time between the thoughts. Frustrating. Someone began to move, and soon we were involved in making choice after choice, each choice amplified by the sense of will which accompanied it. Continuity was a choice. Stopping was a choice. Everything one was aware of was a choice. Each interaction with another performer was a combination of choices. And this must be Simone's work, I thought, because this is what we are doing and people are watching it, thinking this is Simone's work. And I continued grappling. I had the sensation of trying to be *myself*, to behave *myself*. And therein lies a story . . . . ◇