JUDSON THE ATTITUDE

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What a lot of dance performances this season has made clear is that there's a widespread and still growing choreographic interest in the whole bag of dramatic tricks left out when dance got minimal—story, persona, props, costumes, lighting, text, mixed-media and music. Of course these elements never really vanished from downtown dance, but they were either on the "no" list, ignored by choreographers busy stripping down their vocabularies to the essential core. Or they were used in such a minor way as to be relatively unimportant. Over the last two or three years the pendulum has been swinging back, and young choreographers are reveling in theatrical pizzazz. Even the movement-for-movement's sake/structure school is beginning to dress up, dance to the beat, and get physical. That's not to say that a regression is taking place; theater is often approached thoughtfully by choreographers who have learned not to take it for granted.

One part of this recent turnabout is a fascination with a major source of contemporary dance theater, the Judson Dance Theater of the early 60's. Last January, the Bennington College Judson Project sponsored an exhibition of videotapes, scores, and photographs at NYU's Grey Gallery (documented in a valuable catalog, *Judson Dance Theater: 1962-1966*) and then, in April, sponsored—with Danspace—two programs of reconstructed Judson performances.

Judson was, of course, a loosely associated group of choreographers with no formal program or manifesto; what they had in common was Robert Dunn's workshop based on Cageian principles, and a collective ambition to throw up for grabs the rules, definitions, and expectations about what dance was. Judson's most basic assumption was that anybody could make a dance, and that a "dance" could be what that person or persons made. From that wide-open tenet came a performance vocabulary still being explored today: the body as objectified machine and unmediated physical material, the use of game-like structures, task activity as dance movement, ordinary clothing as costume, uninflected phrasing of everyday movement as dance material and structure, incongruous juxtapositions of actions and objects, a significant use of other media, chance proce-
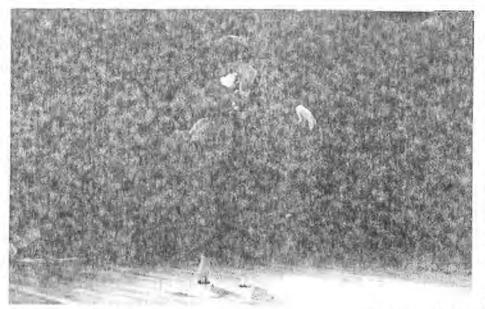

Deborah Hay's *Ten*

Photo: Nathaniel Tileston

Pop #2 by Edward Bharton

Photo: Nathaniel Tileston

dures as choreographic blueprints—the list goes on. However, Judson represents an attitude of free-wheeling curiosity more than a codified set of principles, and is therefore probably the best kind of performance legend, one that demands to be subjectively reinvented to be called up as a resource. But Judson has been *too elusive*, a buzzword with only a vague, general significance, partly because there's almost no film or videotape documentation to show how the performances actually worked. So a re-constructed revolution in this case seemed to be not just an academic pastime but a real necessity.

Some quite different approaches to old work proved how the truly radical Judson idea could push its way through the inevitable aura of reverence and detached histor-

ical curiosity. Lucinda Childs' *Carnation* (1964), which was apparently exactly recreated by its choreographer/performer, gave away nothing to eighteen years of intervening experimentation: it was an unqualified stunner. Childs' absurdist actions—sticking curlers on a colander worn like a crown, jamming sponge-curler "sandwiches" into her mouth, repeatedly running up to and jumping onto a spot on the floor—were precisely timed, wacky images which created a hilarious and slightly eerie portrait of a human machine running amok. On the other hand, Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966), the model of uninflected, non-technical yet tightly structured dance, was performed by the choreographer who had not rehearsed it since August 1981 (until that time she had rehearsed it daily as an exercise). Rainer's efforts to negotiate her own

Cheryl Lillenstein in *Dewhorse*   Photo: Nathaniel Tileston

Lucinda Childs' *Carnation* (1964)   Photo: Terry Schutte

famous creation delivered a performance version of this "dance-for-everyone" rather than a polished and authoritative classic.

Despite its deliberately rough performance, the conceptual clarity and kinetic punch which makes *Trio A* a much-quoted landmark in contemporary dance was still very much present.

Judith Dunn's *Dewhorse* (1963) alternated dance sections (performed here by Cheryl Lillenstein) with trumpet solos by jazz musician Bill Dixon. Wearing tights and a vest made of what looked like grommets, Lillenstein moved through Dunn's easeful but unusual phrases at a deliberate pace, punctuating the slow-paced movement with unexpected gestures like flapping her hands and walking duck-like with a stuffed bird in her mouth. Dixon's breathy blasts of stuttered melodic fragments underlined the pensive tone. *Dewhorse* remained a thoughtful mood study.

There were two task-like activities used as intermission pieces; the audience could come and go, or walk around them at will. In Simone Forti's *Slant Board* (1961), a "dance construction," performers were instructed to keep moving on an inclined wooden ramp by pulling themselves around with knotted ropes attached to the top. For Deborah Ray's *Ten* (1968), that number of performers played follow-the-leader movement games around a pipe rack accompanied by a live rock band. Both dances were performed like good-natured athletic stunts rather than the meditative exploratory exercises they might have been originally (is that a description of 60's vs. 80's dance attitudes in a nutshell?)

..dances were social study pieces which must have been both exhilarating and provocative back when, but which now look like good-natured curiosities. Elaine Summers' *Dance for Lots of People* (1963) put a group of semi-dancers in street clothes through some basic movements en masse —running, falling, jumping, and so on. *Lateral Splay* (1963), choreographed by Carolee Schneeman, sent squads of performers hurtling across the dance floor at intervals throughout the second program; the high-energy, wall-to-wall stampedes resulted in many awkward collisions, but no injuries. This choreography hinges on an acceptance of its freeing social energy, but that aim seems too innocent now to have much impact.

Some other revivals raised more problematic questions. Steve Paxton's *Jag Ville Gorna Telefonera* (1964) was a physically impressive, proto-contact piece as performed by Stephen Petronio and Randy Warshaw of Trisha Brown's company, but the original must have been a wilder, much less polished event when first performed by Paxton and Robert Rauschenberg (not to mention the original's chickens, overstuffed chair, and clothes that pulled apart). *Octandre* (1957), a dance by the late James Waring, was reconstructed and performed by Aileen Passloff with more angst than irony, turning Waring's reputed playful knowingness into Knowledge.

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Typical of any variety show program, some acts were likeable whimsies, like Edward Bhartonn's balloon-crushing back flips in *Pop #1* and *Pop #2* (1963), a fluxus-like stunt done with a seriousness comically out of whack with its payoff. In *Meditation* (1966), Remy Charlip stood in place at the St. Mark's Church altar and writhed slo-mo gestures like a priest stuck in an endless ritual; his cool histrionics were played out to the ironic accompaniment of Massenet's overwrought *Meditation of Thais*.

And there were the inevitable longeurs in acts that were better left interred: Brian dePalma's too-long, in-joke film *Wotan's Wake* (1963) and Philip Corner's self-involved, mindlessly conceptual music performances (in *Keyboard Dances* [1964], he played the piano with his feet).

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As a whole, the Judson Dance Theater reconstructions proved that the inventiveness of Judson ideas was more than conceptual, that Judson performance acted as well as thought. Further, the programs showed the impressively wide range of what was presented as "Judson" performance; there's a lesson for the contemporary urge to pigeonhole and narrowly define dance. Most importantly, the event made it clear that Judson lives on in new dance performance. ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■