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dance umbrella

by Donald Hutera

NEWS

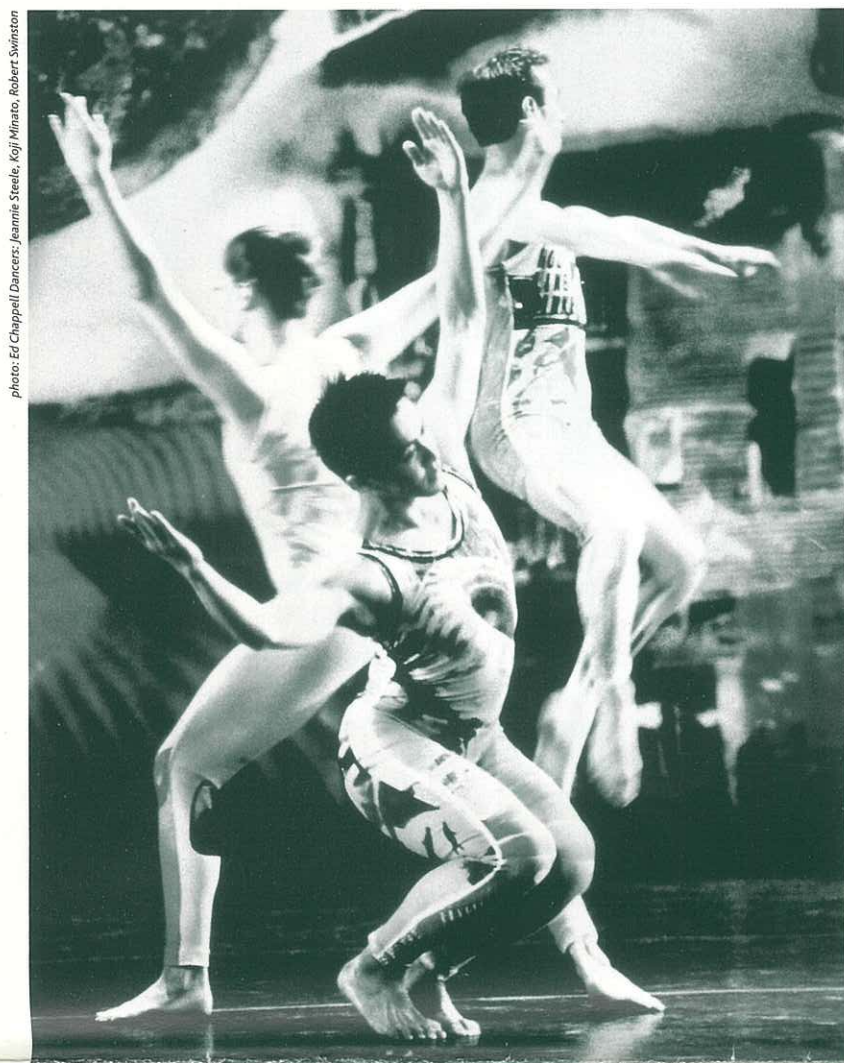


photo: Ed Chappell Dancers; Joanne Steele, Koji Minato, Robert Swinson

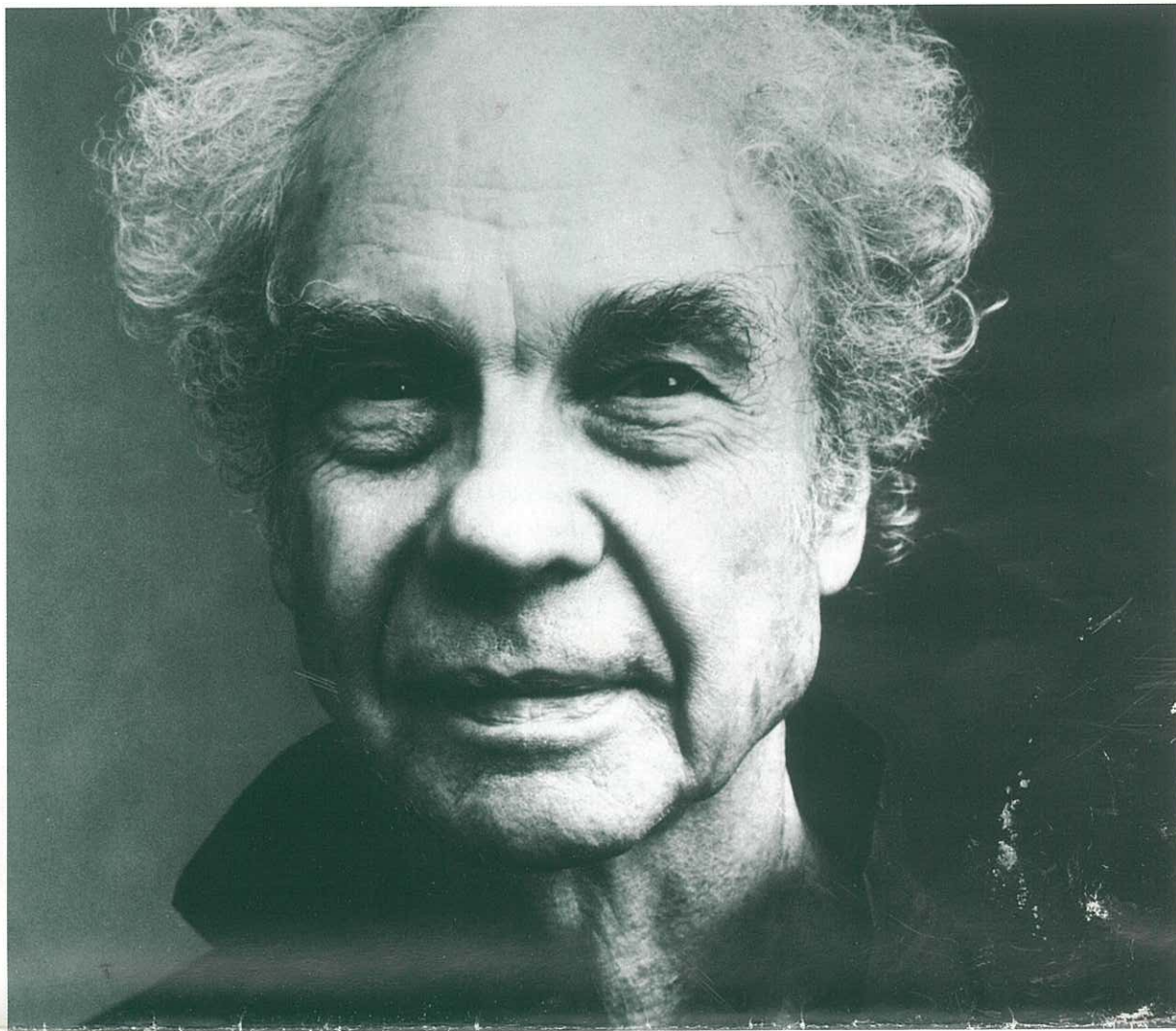


photo: Merce Cunningham © Annie Leibovitz

RESIDENT MASTER

Merce Cunningham, commonly acknowledged as America's greatest living choreographer, is kicking off Umbrella 2002 with *Fluid Canvas*, a Barbican co-commission and world premiere, and repertory work (Tue 10 to Sat 14 Sep) at the Barbican Theatre. But that's not all the venerable gentleman will be offering to dance-goers this year. Umbrella has seized the opportunity to create a week-long residency with him and his company. This is the troupe's first major residency in the UK, and a part of a programme of events marking its 50th anniversary. Umbrella is joining forces with London Contemporary Dance School, which is co-producing the week and providing the newly-renovated school as a venue.

Residency co-ordinator and free-lance conference producer Elizabeth Anderson is excited about the entire agenda. "The range and variety of the week's activities will provide unprecedented access to the company through classes and rehearsals, a study day, film screenings, a teachers' discussion group and interviews with key collaborators. We're privileged that Merce himself will be present at a number of events, and that company archivist David Vaughan, who has been with the company since the early 1950s, will also take part."

Not all of the residency is open to the public, but those events which are should not be missed. Take the Study Day (Mon 16 Sep, 2pm–9.30pm). It features, in addition to an interview with Cunningham, panel discussions with past and present company members. Included among the former are Carolyn Brown, who danced with Cunningham between 1953 and 1972, and England's Emma Diamond, who was a company member from 1988 to 1994.

The day has been organised by dance/theatre critic Alastair Macaulay, and will conclude with screenings of rare video footage of the company in rehearsal and performance between 1944 and 1995. On Tuesday 17 September Bob Lockyer, former executive producer of dance programmes at the BBC, presents three films of Cunningham's work stretching from 1964 to 1991. The following evening at 6pm Charles Atlas's award-winning documentary, *Merce Cunningham – A Lifetime of Dance*, will be shown. Later at 8pm, current Cunningham dancer Daniel Roberts will perform his reconstruction of *Totem Ancestor*, Cunningham's first important solo dating from 1942.

At 6pm on Thursday 19 September you can see Elliot Caplan's award-winning documentary about Cunningham and his on and offstage partner, the late composer John Cage. Two hours later composer and company musical director Takehisa Kosugi will be in conversation with Richard Steinitz and Annette Morreau about his own, Cage's and the late David Tudor's contributions to Cunningham's oeuvre. The next day the focus at 6pm is on three Charles Atlas films including his and Cunningham's stunning 1982 collaboration *Channels/Inserts*, a dance made for the camera using chance methods. The residency culminates Friday 20 September at 8pm, when Cunningham will be in conversation with both Macaulay and British choreographer Richard Alston.

WHO: MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY
WHAT: RESIDENCY
WHEN: MON 16 – FRI 20 SEP
WHERE: THE PLACE
TICKETS: 020 7387 0031

REVISIONING THE BODY

Virtual Incarnations, the dance and technology-based strand of Umbrella, is in its third year and going strong. The field is in constant evolution, as the available possibilities grow increasingly sophisticated. Ghislaine Boddington (*shinkansen / ResCen*) is a great spokesperson for these developments. "It's all about looking at the body in a different way," she says. It's also about reconceiving the experience of dance-related events. "It's a different feeling to be in an installation than when you're sitting in a seat watching a time-based performance. You can choose whether to look quickly and move on, or spend hours." She would advocate the latter approach, especially when it comes to the work on view in Umbrella 2002.

Loops (Tue 10 – Sat 14 Sep, 2–8pm in the ICA Theatre) is described as 'a 21st-century portrait of Merce Cunningham' made by Paul Kaiser, Shelley Eshkar and Marc Downie. The three are Cunningham's collaborators on *Fluid Canvas* which opens Umbrella 2002. Their installation, which uses projection and sound, expresses the great man's intricate finger and hand movements into a 3D space.

Cunningham, Kaiser and Eshkar will also be joining the panel for the *Live Chat Room* at the ICA on Saturday 14 September which will also be webcast. This year's discussion will focus on the collaborative process evolving from choreographers making dance with digital artists.

James Buckhouse's *Tap* is a palm-based wireless project featuring animated characters of both sexes that 'learn' tap dancing and give performances. Some twenty 'palm-tops'

will be available as part of the installation, which is open at the ICA's New Media Centre Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 and Wednesday 25 – Saturday 28 September (Wed–Fri 4–8pm, Sat 2–6pm). Dance fans take note: British dancer-choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, now with New York City Ballet, was a part of this project.

Kondition Pluriel is the name of a collaboration between multi-media artist Martin Kusch and choreographer Marie-Claude Poulin. For their ICA appearance (Tue 17 – Wed 18 Sep at 8pm) the pair have concocted a performance that allows the dancers to control the environment projected around them onstage, via wearable computers and sensors. It is, as with all of *Virtual Incarnations*, nothing less than a revisioning of the human body and its capabilities.

WHO: VIRTUAL INCARNATIONS
WHEN: WED 11 – SAT 28 SEP
WHERE: ICA
TICKETS: 020 7930 3647



Photo: Mattia Ek

SEA OF NERVES

Carol Brown has got her nerve. Literally, as that's the name of the work this brainy, London-based dancer-choreographer will present in Umbrella 2002. A performance installation with no fixed seating, it explores what its maker calls "the city in the body" via a duet staged on an undulating ramp. "It's like a runway or road which gives a directional flow to the choreography," she elaborates, "like the constancy of traffic." The facility with which Brown trots out such phrases as "urban wave forms" and "riding the city – like skateboarders do" indicates how at home she is with what she's created. She'd better be, given that she's also in it.

She doesn't make it easy on herself. In *Nerve*, Brown says, "two people [her and Grant McLay] meet and animate each other, crash and burn out. It's more about states of being and becoming than something happening in a narrative sense. It considers the rub of the city on our corporeality, and how we're shaped by the built environments and spatial textures we inhabit. We're performing on a moulded asphalt platform under a welded mesh canopy. It feels gritty, because of the ferocity of the partnering and the roughness of the floor scraping and abrading our skins. But it doesn't really hurt."

Conceptually, and in the details of its production, *Nerve* fascinates. The piece grew out of *Shelf Life*, a four-hour performance installation Brown and Esther Rolinson devised for gallery environments. That experience encouraged Brown to seek further possibilities for performance in multi-dimensional settings because "they create different kinds of relationships between performers and spectators."

A Jerwood Choreography Award enabled Brown to engage in period of research and development with architect Stewart Dodd, of Satellite Design. "I've been inspired by the work of contemporary architects such as Zaha Hadid [co-creator of *Metapolis*, the Charleroi Danses/Plan K production that is also in Umbrella 2002], Greg Lynn and Daniel Libeskind. They all ask questions in relation to cities, bodies and perspectival vision. In particular how we model, shape, carve and incorporate space – and how it informs our movement identity."

A week of brainstorming with Dodd led to the dramaturgical notion of two strangers in a pliable city. "I was also interested in a duet with a male," Brown continues, "which didn't assume a he-she duality, but somehow creates a sense of tension beyond gender." She's very good at specifics. "The

idea of moving an inert body across an asphalt ramp came out of the issue of the body as something that can be taken hold of and prodded, pushed and compressed by the urban fabric."

The contribution of Brown's regular collaborator, lighting designer Michael Mannion, is crucial. Rather than rely on the conventions of theatrical lighting, his work is built into Dodd's structure. "Lighting cuts through in sharp, white slices from underneath the ramp and down through the mesh," Brown says, "dissecting the movement." She also admires Russell Scoones' sound design, featuring aural samples of street life in Rome, Philadelphia and London.

Nerve is further supported by Brown's own hallucinatory, cut-and-paste text, which post-dates the choreography. Fragments of two intersecting stories – one about a sleeping volcanologist, the other about a drugged-out homeless girl – were induced by the inert bodies (whether sleeping, drugged, drunk or derelict) Brown spotted on the street, in public transport systems or aboard long-haul flights. She also drew upon the French film *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, a wayward, odd-couple grand romance featuring a heroine who is gradually losing her sight.

Nerve is accompanied by the video dance work *The Idea of the Sea*. Made in Philadelphia with Tobin Rothlein, it charts a lone woman's nocturnal journey "from the belly of the city to the sea" and contrasts the noise and lights of Atlantic City's casino culture with the relative quiet of the beach.

"The challenge for contemporary art," Brown believes, "is to create new forms which don't rely upon the assumptions of the past." What's next for her? "A kind of choreography of psycho-geographies." Working with a photographer and videographer she'll be "mapping inner and outer body space." *The Observatory* premieres in December at Monaco's Dance on Screen festival.

Brown may have nerve in reserve, but just what keeps her going? "Momentum. Caffeine. Yoga. Curiosity. Desire."

WHO: CAROL BROWN DANCES
WHAT: NERVE/THE IDEA OF SEA
WHEN: MON 30 SEP – WED 2 OCT
WHERE: THE PLACE:
ROBIN HOWARD DANCE THEATRE
TICKETS: 020 7387 0031



Photo: Chris Nash

GENU-FLEXION

One of the loveliest things about Yael Flexer's dances is their untrendy, non-dumbed-down accessibility. This Israeli-born, London-based choreographer makes work that is unpretentious, warm and often humorous, yet without giving short-shrift to the complexities and ambiguities of being alive. "I like to keep it open," is how she puts it. Once a dance is made, Flexer says, "it becomes itself." There is an improvisatory element to her working method. "I give the dancers the freedom to change what a dance means along the way, and for the audience to intervene. They can alter what seems serious one night and make it funny the next."

Flexible Shorts, Flexer's current touring programme, consists of four dances which have been put together in recognition of the tenth anniversary of company. "When I started," she remembers, "I guess what I aspired to, or what existed at the time, were companies like V-Tol, The Cholmondeleys, Yolande Snaith, Ricochet and DV8. The map has changed quite a lot since then, with many people working in a variety of ways and not much increased funding. My vision has gradually changed over the years too, to a point where now I'm almost schizophrenically interested in creating work that is at two extremes: very large-scale pieces alongside ultra-intimate work. My imagination gets tickled by the idea of creating dances with big groups of people. These seem to draw in new audiences and incorporate elements like film and installation work. But equally, I'm constantly fascinated by the fragility and depth of solos and duets, and the work that both performers and viewers have to put in to make that relationship work."

Either way, Flexer says, "I'm more interested in having a good time and not over-dramatising something I make." At the same time she feels a need "to make something that gets an immediate response. I always need to have a dialogue. It's that ultimate Jewish thing."

Flexer is reviving her solo *Yes?* "It was always playfully seductive and cheeky," she remarks, "but it's become more womanly now." And more confident, a reflection of changes within her. "Before, when I was very timid, it had a real sweetness. Now I'm enjoying my presence onstage. The form and ideas are so clear you could almost do it through the ages. It's very delicate and light." *Slightly Less Flexible*, a duet for dancers Fiona Edwards and Lisa Kendall, is an examination of "how heavily or lightly something is taken."

The bill is rounded out by dances by other choreographers. Flexer and Hanna Gillgren comprise the cast of David Dorfman's *Short Term*. She praises him as "wild to work with. It's got too many ideas for one piece. He uses what's around at the time. It talks about relationships as places of aggression or leaving, and the strategies of ownership. There are little snippets of autobiographical statements in it, and some truisms. It's light, but with a residue."

Jamie Watton's *Lifelong* is the one piece with no text, although in Flexer's words "it talks about the relentlessness of dancing and dancers. We're usually pushing ourselves. The gorgeous lighting is by Lucy Carter [Flexer's regular collaborator], and the score by Jules Maxwell has a Russian influence. There's a boxing ring setting, the idea of competition, and yet there's a delicate humour that is very Jamie." The dance is for three women. Flexer herself isn't one of them, but you can be sure the work will be imbued with her spirit too.

WHO: BEDLAM DANCE COMPANY
WHAT: FLEXIBLE SHORTS
WHEN: FRI 4 – SAT 5 OCT
WHERE: THE PLACE:
ROBIN HOWARD DANCE THEATRE
TICKETS: 020 7387 0031