

State TheatreNJ.org
Keynotes



MERCE CUNNINGHAM
DANCE COMPANY

Welcome!

The State Theatre in New Brunswick, NJ welcomes you to the performance of Merce Cunningham Dance Company, part of the ensemble's "Legacy Tour"—a two-year world tour celebrating Merce Cunningham's lifetime of artistic achievement. This marks the company's farewell tour, and the last opportunity to see Cunningham's choreography performed by the company he personally trained. The program features Cunningham's *Nearly 90*², a restaging of his final work, *Nearly 90*.

These *Keynotes* provide information to help you watch the performance with a well informed eye. We hope that the materials in this guide will add to your understanding and enjoyment of the performance and inspire you to continue exploring the art of modern dance.

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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.

Meet the Company



Merce Cunningham Dance Company was founded in 1953 at Black Mountain College. The original company included both dancers and musicians, who toured in a cramped Volkswagen bus. They made their first international tour—to Europe, India, Thailand, and Japan—in 1964. The current ensemble comprises 14 dancers, equally divided between women and men. They perform exclusively the works of choreographer and artistic director Merce Cunningham.

In the more than 50 years since the company's inception, they have collaborated with artists from all artistic disciplines, redefining the way audiences around the world experience the visual and performing arts. Merce Cunningham Dance Company has commissioned more work from contemporary composers than any other dance company. In addition to company co-founder, John Cage, musical collaborators have included Brian Eno, Takehisa Kosugi, Alan Hovhaness, Lou Harrison, Sonic Youth, John Paul Jones, and Radiohead. Up until his death in 1992, Cage served as the ensemble's Musical Advisor. He was succeeded by David Tudor, and then by current Musical Advisor Takehisa Kosugi. The company has also collaborated with some of the most innovative visual artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, among them Robert Rauschenberg (resident designer from 1954 until 1964), Jasper Johns, Isamu Noguchi, Willem de Kooning, Frank Stella, Bruce Nauman, Rei Kawakubo, and Andy Warhol.

Nearly 90² Collaborators

John Paul Jones is a musician, composer, arranger, and record producer. In 1968, at the age of 22, he co-founded the band Led Zeppelin with Jimmy Page. Before disbanding in 1980, the band released 9 albums and made 26 world tours.



Since 1980 his collaborators have included Paul McCartney, Brian Eno, The Butthole Surfers, R.E.M, and Lenny Kravitz. He has released two solo albums: *Zooma* and *The Thunderthief*. Jones began writing music for Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 2009. He performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with the band Sonic Youth in *Nearly Ninety*.

Takehisa Kosugi was born in Tokyo in 1938 and has spent his life creating mixed-media sound performances and installations. He co-founded the musical groups, Group Ongaku and Taj Mahal Travellers. Kosugi has been a resident composer and performer with Merce



Cunningham Dance Company since 1977, and became the music director in 1995. Some of his commissioned works with the company include *Cycles* (1981), *Assemblage* (1986), and *Spectra* (1989).

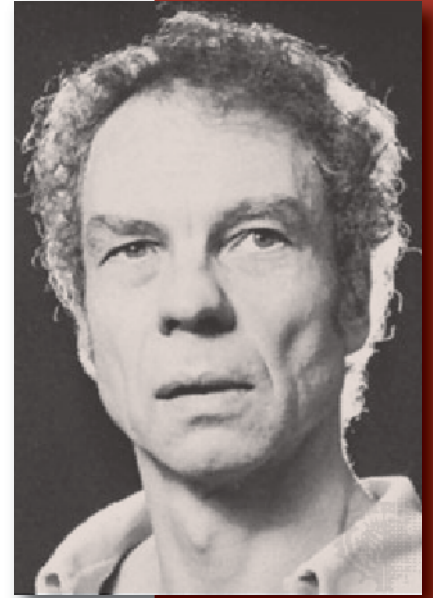
Merce Cunningham

Over the course of nearly 60 years, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham reshaped the landscape of modern dance. He was born in Centralia, Washington, in 1919. While at Bennington College, he was invited by modern dance pioneer Martha Graham to join her troupe, where he created a number of major roles. With Graham's encouragement, he took up choreography. In 1953, he founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and went on to choreograph nearly 200 works for the ensemble.

Cunningham was at the forefront of the avant garde movement, exploding the most basic assumptions about dance. He deconstructed the art form, teasing apart its segments and then sticking them together again, often randomly, to create unexpected connections. His main collaborator was his life partner—the composer John Cage. They worked together from 1942 until Cage's death 50 years later. Their artistic experiments led them to treat music and dance as two separate and abstract elements, entirely independent of one another. (Cunningham's dancers learn and rehearse a work in silence and often do not hear the music until the dress rehearsal or even the first performance.) Another Cunningham innovation was "choreography by chance," a technique in which isolated movements are assigned their place in a sequence of movements by such random methods as tossing a coin.

In the 1970s, Cunningham began exploring the integration of dance and technology. Since 1991, he worked with the computer program DanceForms, and in 1997 he began work in motion capture. His interest in new media resulted in [Mondays with Merce](#), a webcast series providing a look at the company and Cunningham's teaching technique.

Outside of his own company, Cunningham created works for the New York City Ballet and Paris Opera Ballet, and saw his dances included in the repertoire of the American Ballet Theatre, the Boston Ballet, and other ensembles. At his death at the age of 90, he had received some of the most prestigious awards given in the arts, including the National Medal of Arts, the MacArthur Fellowship, the Kennedy Center Honors, and Officer of the French Légion d'honneur. His life and work have been the subject of four books and three exhibitions.



Nearly 90²

In April 2009, Merce Cunningham premiered his final work, titled *Nearly Ninety*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to celebrate his 90th birthday. (The title referred to his age and also to the length of the piece—nearly 90 minutes of choreography.) It is the last work he completed before his death in 2009. He later arranged a pared-down touring version of the piece, *Nearly 90²*, featuring a new lighting design by Christine Shallenberg and new costumes by Anna Finke. Cunningham also added short dance transitions that turned out to be his final choreography.

Nearly 90² features music by Led Zeppelin founding member John Paul Jones and mixed-media sound composer Takehisa Kosugi, lighting by Christine Shallenberg, and costume design by Anna Finke. As usual with Merce Cunningham, the musicians' performance follows their own scheme, with no connection to the dancers' movements. The work was first performed at the Krannert Center for the Arts (Urbana, IL) on September 25, 2009—two months after Cunningham's death.



Dance Review: Nearly 90² Brims with Youth

March 29, 2010 By Allan Ulrich, Chronicle Dance Correspondent

"Nearly 90²," given its premiere by Cal Performances Friday evening at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, runs, by the clock, exactly 88 minutes. In fact, in its controlled energy, startling unpredictability and gorgeous repose, the piece runs about 57 years. That was the life span of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

This final piece from the choreographer before his death in July serves as the first installment in the company's Legacy Tour, a two-year traveling farewell to the troupe, which, per its creator's wishes, will disband after 2011.

It would be logical to think that the work, created as Cunningham entered his 10th decade, would project a kind of autumnal summing up. In fact, the measured high spirits and emphasis on the dancer's potential for building evanescent scenarios through movement alone brims with youthfulness. Perhaps a bit of self-homage creeps in. It was impossible not to recall Cunningham's dancing presence. Repeatedly through the first half of the work, a man canters across the stage, stops, crouches and runs his hands in front of his face, as Cunningham did so many times.

Although the piece was made for 13 dancers, the members of the team rarely appear at the same time. Cunningham concerns himself with solos and the dynamic of duets and trios. At the beginning, Rashaun Mitchell and Daniel Madoff, two of the exceptional performers in this last company, are joined by Melissa Toogood and Andrea Weber in a series of arched backs and supported arabesques. The others introduce themselves in couples, and the work evolves in a series of sequences, so clear in purpose and beautiful in execution you hope they will run on forever.

Cunningham sometimes plays with our expectations. We witness the testing of balances, which suddenly break off. We see passing unisons and formations that look like military drills. And we get a string of ingenious trios, as two men twist a woman's limb into shapes that nature probably never intended. And Cunningham allows moments of sheer exuberance. The men erupt in circular dashes around the stage. Silas Riener need do nothing more than jump in place to express utter elation. So much for that rumor that Cunningham was immune to tonal shading.



Books

Appreciating Dance: A Guide to the World's Liveliest Art, by Harriet R. Lihs. Princeton Book Company, 3rd edition, 2002

Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham, by Carolyn Brown. Northwestern University Press, 2009

The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, by Merce Cunningham and Jacqueline Lesschaeve. Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2000

Fifty Contemporary Choreographers, by Martha Bremser. Routledge, 1999. Includes an entry on Merce Cunningham.

Merce Cunningham, by Melissa Harris and Merce Cunningham. Charta, 1999

Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance, by Roger Copeland. Routledge, 2003

Silence: Lectures and Writings, by John Cage. Wesleyan, 1961

Music

Cage: Music for Merce Cunningham. Mode, 1995. Audio CD

3 Works for Live Electronics, composed by David Tudor; performed by Takehisa Kosugi. Includes "Phonemes," commissioned by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Audio CD

Video

Cage/Cunningham - a film by Elliot Caplan. A documentary about the 50-year collaboration of John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Kultur Video, 2007. DVD

Merce Cunningham - A Lifetime of Dance. Winstar, 2001. DVD

Merce Cunningham Dance Company: Split Sides. Microcinema, 2009. DVD

Merce Cunningham Collection: Volume 1. Total Film Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD

Online

www.merce.org

www.youtube.com/MerceCunninghamDance - Merce Cunningham Dance Company's YouTube channel

[New York Times Dance Review](#) - by Alastair Macaulay

[Merce Cunningham: A Lifetime of Dance](#) - from the PBS "American Masters" series

[BBC Radio Interview](#) - John Tusa interviews Merce Cunningham.

[Experiments in the Studio](#) - Takehisa Kosugi in the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio, March 31, 2008

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