

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 into 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

Happening, audience, 1960



photo: Robert Rauschenberg

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 everyday. "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 *Dewhorse* (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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Jag Ville Gorna Telefonera (originally performed by Paxton and Robert Rauschenberg in 1964), the rendition was so smooth, beautiful, and convincing, that Trisha Brown could be overheard exclaiming in jest, "Which one was Bob?" More than any other work on the program, *Jag Ville* . . . rose to the historical occasion by making the past look prophetic. The dance was based on Paxton's original score of pictures showing pairs of athletes engaged in sporting events. In addition to duplicating some of the "action-shots," Warsaw and Petronio captured the quality of play and rivalry between two individuals moving together. Both dancers have extensive backgrounds in Contact Improvisation (initiated by Paxton in 1972) and both presently dance with Trisha Brown. The performance was a momentous exchange between Paxton's score and the accomplished movement sense of the two dancers.

I made the mistake of not reading my program carefully enough on the first night and as a result missed seeing Simone Forti's *Slant Board* at intermission time. Pictures and drawings of *Slant Board* and other "dance constructions," show how these dances were self-fulfilled activities. I have seen *Huddle*, another of Forti's constructions, and remember how fascinating it was to watch people utterly absorbed and occupied by the requirements of what they were doing. It's easy to see how this work led to Forti's interest in zoo animals who possess an even more

constant occupation with their own activities.

I was surprised that the Judson pieces looked so much like dances. Maybe this was because after twenty years their mode of presentation has been assimilated by many dancers and choreographers and has been made familiar through photographs, stories, commentaries, and sketches. While challenging and demystifying the role of "performer on stage," they acquired other performing abilities. Seen in the present, these non-demonstrative attitudes about performing (so much a part of the Judson legacy) aren't as eccentric as they may once have appeared. In spite of Yvonne Rainer's frequently referred to declaration against the magic and transforming qualities of the theater experience, there is something fundamentally "magical" about live performance. It is this quality which makes an observer appreciate or resent the situation.

For anyone who has read or heard anecdotes of Judson, or followed the later careers of Judson dancers, the Reconstruction was a rare opportunity. Even though most of the audience members were either too young, or out of town, or unaware at the time of the original performances, there was a sense of reconvening. Perhaps the Judson Reconstruction is the beginning of a new form of documentation, a ritual to be performed every twenty years. ♦

Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Yvonne Rainer in first performance of *The Mind is a Muscle, part 1* or *Trio A* at Judson Church, 1/10/66.



REMARKS

FROM

THE

AUDIENCE

Yvonne. I'd come again and again to see Yvonne do Trio A. If she hadn't done it in months, years or minutes, I'd see her again. There is something very sad in her dancing. Something stark and rare about her. She dances as if sleepwalking but all the while keeping her concentration fixed on this inexorable path as if she was a light sleeper, but one whom no one could seem to wake up. All the same, we tiptoe around her.

She is dancing her way. It goes nowhere but doesn't stay in the same

place. It tells her story, the woman who. . . Exactly. Ellipse. Ellipse.

She doesn't make her handstand the first time through and stops to look at it wondering for a moment if she will fit into it after all these years. It isn't a question of fat or thin but who's in her skin. She separates and unites with her own image as fast as a mirror could tell, and we were watching it as if from behind that mirror, knowing she knew we were watching, though it seems it was built as a one way mirror at the time.

Nancy Stark Smith

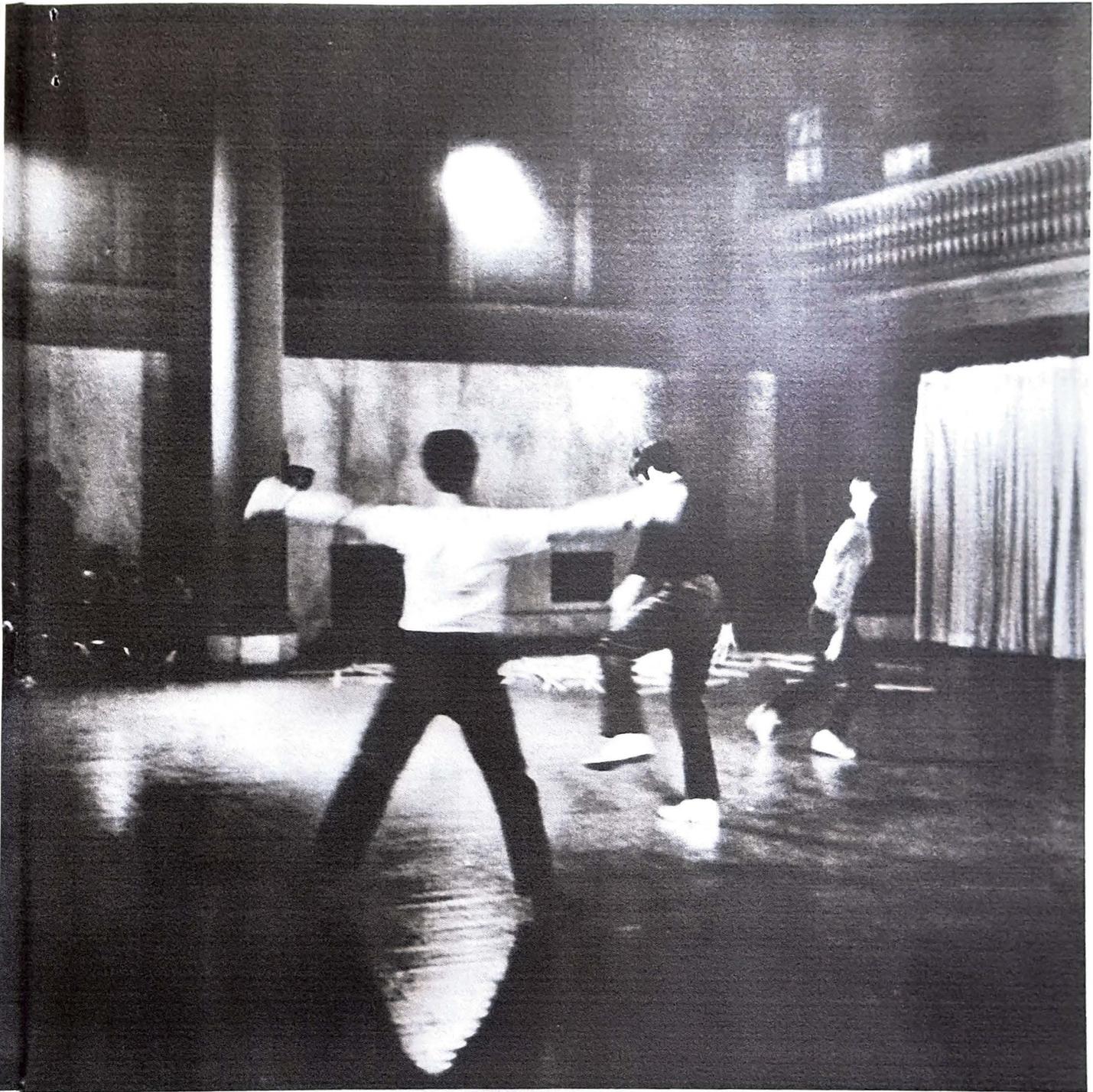


photo: Peter Moore © 1966

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