THIS CONFUSING AVANT-GARDE

By Joan Cass

A number of people expressed puzzlement about the Merce Cunningham Company which appeared in Israel during the summer Israeli Festival, wanting to know: what did the dances mean, and why was the music so awful ? I can only assume that Cunningham represents to many in our audiences an unfamiliar "Avant-garde", in contrast to most of the choreographers whose works are seen here.

The term "avant-garde" is a loose one, relative to both the year being discussed and each viewer's particular dance experience. For critics, during the last decade or so,"avant-garde" came to mean specifically the latest developments in the New York scene. Those of us who follow the stylistic flip-flops in all the arts, see how dizzying the ever-accelerating inflation of novelty can become, sometimes intriguing, sometimes merely time-wasting. For audiences like the Israeli one who get only occasional spin-offs from the New York breeding-ground, the whole picture is confusing. A little historical perspective might accordingly, be helpful.

The style known as "modern dance" came about more than fifty years ago as a rebellion against classical ballet. Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Mary Wigman, all protested against the superficiality of works like "Swan Lake" which by their day survived only as sterile decoration and exhibitionism, through thousands of soul-less repetitions. Then the pendulum swung again as, beginning in the 1950's dancers became tired of wallowing in emotional turmoil and staged a revolt against the Graham type of expressionism, which in its turn had been reduced to cliche by endless limitations. They joined artists in other fields who were rejecting subject matter completely and turning to the exploration of forms and materials.

Merce Cunningham was in the forefront of this phase. His concern over the past 20 years has been solely with movement. One composition may be "about" falling; another "about" turning through space; another "about" little jumps. He has been interested in the creation of clusters of energetic motion in changing rhythms, changing spatial designs, and changing group arrangements. The technical basis of his pieces is a personal, stylized, combination of Martha Graham's pulsing torso patterns, with the linear leg extensions, jumps and leaps of classical ballet.

There is no meaning to be sought in a Cunningham composition, except pleasurable perception of the physical shapes and dynamic phrases presented by highly-trained, meticulously rehearsed dancers. Any social comment, story or psychological nuance is purely in the eye of the beholder. As for the sound accompaniment, this is the contribution of John Cage and other experimental composers chosen by him. Cage also is concerned with materials. He uses all sounds, whether environmental, electronic, or even occasionally those produced on a conventional musical instrument. His noises have only one connection with the movements on stage - that of simultaneity.

This raises the entire issue of music, which has such a powerful impact in its own right, that it can almost make or break a dance. Choreographers treat music in a variety of ways. One extreme is the actual visualization of a piece of music as the sole content of a dance. (Isadora Duncan and more recently George Balanchine fit into this end of the scale). Conventionally, music is used as a reenforcement of choregraphic ideas, feelings and structures. The other extreme is the consideration of the sound score existing at the same time as a dance, but as a separate event, pursuing its own logic. This last can be a profound irritation, especially in the case of someone like Cage who seems to prefer the "static" noise and feedback of a stereo system or intolerably loud or monotonous noises to what is usually called "music".

Why would a choreographer like Cunningham allow these unpleasant sounds to negate the effect of often beautiful movement passages ? Cunningham perversely responded to my question: "Perhaps the two things work together to

support each other. Perhaps if the music would not have been what you call 'negating' (the dance) it would have made it seem less interesting."

The Cunningham-Cage collaboration and the philosophy that went along with it had a tremendous effect on a whole generation of young artists. So did Alwin Nikolais, with his theatrical collages that combined movement, his own electronic scores, elaborate lighting effects, vividly colored slides, architected sets and costumes. The emphasis in these cases was totally on sensation, sometimes focussing on gorgeous visual effects; sometimes on the perception of energetic movement; sometimes on the deliberately jarring impact of several art systems proceeding at cross-purposes. At first following in their footsteps and then hacking out new trails, came an army of "avant-garde" experimenters with their headquarters in New York.

Eventually even some established choreographers like Jerome Robbins made forays into new territory. His "Watermill" (1972) featured the stunning decor of an Oriental landscape dominated by gigantic sheaves and a moon that waxed, waned, rose and set; earth colors bathed in glowing luminescence; sounds of wailing flutes and throbbing drums. For more than an hour Edward Villella figured in slow-motion, hypnotic, ceremonial visions - dreamlike and disconnected. Warriors ran back and forth. Men seeded the ground. A Kabuki-type dog-lion jumped in, romping with and then attacking ferociously a man with two hooded companions. A girl brushed her hair and then joined a boy in an athletic, erotic pas de deux. Several other artists played with time and slow, slow, slow-motion. In Rudy Perez's solo "Coverage" he sat on a chair and took about four minutes to raise one arm. Robert Wilson's movement play "Ka Mountain and Guardenia Terrace" went on for 200 hours at the 1972 Arts Festival in Iran. In one winter week in New York that year I saw Phylis Lamhut (formerly with Alwin Nikolais) move archly to a banal dialogue. Jeff Duncan (from Anna Sokolow's group) blended falls and rebounds and sudden stops. Albert Reid (who had been in Merce Cunningham's company) made a dance for couples to Mozart in a semi-ballet manner that was neither mocking nor serious - just movement.

The Israeli scene has not been totally oblivious to this vogue. Mirali Sharon, Gene Hill Sagan, Oshra Elkayam-Ronen, Rachel Cafri and others have done their share of experimenting after having been exposed to the New York ferment. Two performances of note took place in this area last year. One was "Secret Places" by Ruth Eyal at the Jerusalem "Khan Theatre" in which the performers used their bodies as devices for non-verbal communication, while serving at the same time as their own accompanying percussion instruments, according to novel customs that determined both sound and movement. One participant clanged robotlike and moved stiffly in a stretch jersy suit stuffed with metal cans; another struck pert, staccato comments against wooden bowls affixed to her legs, breast, backside, and so on. The other event was a multi-media happening at the Israel Museum's Sculpture Garden, which combined a percussion concert, films of avant-garde dance and some live movement. While this didn't quite come off, it was certainly an attempt to "make the scene".

As of this writing, the major figure on the "avant-garde" scene in the U.S. is Twyla Tharp. In the spring of 1970, Tharp appeared with her group in a lobby of the M.I.T. Administration Building. When I arrived, a large number of people were rolling around, jumping, stretching their legs, and waving their arms by themselves. It was the kind of scene you might find in a dance studio before class begins, when everybody works on his own weaknesses or specialties, or just warms ups. People were entering and leaving the building to go about their business, and some would pause to watch for a short or long time.

Gradually the dancers dispersed into small knots and went through obviously prepared patterns of jumps and hopping steps across space. Later I saw a sequence of inventive falls and floor movements and still later, individuals went up on the balconies or into remote corners and signalled to one another. The content of all these movements was a rhythmical, mathematical exercise in dance. Its complexity can be gleaned from these conditions for one 45-second section of her "Group Activities" which Tharp set down in an article: "It is made of a six-second jumping phrase repeated eight times, travelling a linear pattern that touches all four sides of the space". At that time, the choreographer was only one of many.

When I went to see her at N.Y.Town Hall in April,1975, she was very much "in", having been widely filmed, reviewed, interviewed and in 1973 been invited to stage a work for the Joffrey Ballet that received a great deal of attention.

On this occasion the programme listed three numbers: "Sue's Leg", "Work in Progress" and "Bach". Tharp, a pleasant-faced, boyish looking woman with shot, blunt-cut hair, came out to tell the audience the performers' names and a little about each piece, as well as about several additional selections to be included. Her arch delivery projected a nonchalance that bordered on the cute. "I think this is a perfect fugue. They tell me it isn't a fugue at all, but a canon. Anyway..."

Some of the movement was also accompanied by conversation: "I think seeing is not believing... I think believing is not seeing... Three is definitely a crowd." And so on. Most of the accompaniment consisted of jazz bits by Scott Joplin, Bix Beiderbecke, Jelly Roll Morton, with variations on such themes of the '20's as "Tea for Two", and "I can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby". Bach was heard in a Swingles arrangement.

The movements were snatches of tap dance, the Charleston, leg lifts, prosaic arm gestures, pratt falls, jogging around. The performing style was characterized by phrases broken off in the middle; each of the group occupying his own time and space; bodies relaxed, even slack; deadpan faces with occasional winks or shrugs. The expressive content of the program said: "We dance because this is what we do. Don't waste time looking for connections or meanings. Notice how campy and quaint all these old-time steps are. We don't take any of it seriously of course".

Excerpts from a BBC television special on the company were also shown in a very big, blown-up film projection. Split-screen techniques and montages, such as one showing puppet-like dancers gyrating against a giant trumpet player's face, (actually only his right nostril) heightened the effect of coy non-involvement. Throughout, the movements were inventive and ever-changing and pleasant to watch, although after a while I found the whole a little monotonous, since clearly there was no chance of any change in mood or statement.

A young woman near me helped a man find a scarce seat, smugly explaining, "If you have the good taste to come here, you deserve a seat." I couldn't help thinking about changing fashions in cultural snobbism. Forty years ago those with pretensions to good taste in modern dance would have been earnestly watching Martha Graham and would have been openly contemptuous of pop tap-dancing and Jelly Roll Morton. It was also amusing when viewers' applause broke into dance sequences because they happened to contain a familiar soft-shoe routine or flashy rhythmic tapping. Tharp was obviously being very tongue-in-cheek, and it seemed a bit unfair that she should have it both ways - getting both the appreciation for the entertaining original and that approval that an audience bestows when it feels in on a joke with an artist who is poking fun. They certainly did not fathom the complicated structures devized with such analytical precision, because these are simply too involved to be grasped in the course of a performance. The experimental phase is still very much in vogue - even if it is becoming repetitious. Experiments are always of more importance to the artists themselves than to their audiences who always lag behind. But at least experimentation denotes activity, and when there is enough activity there is promise of a break-through in communication.

Only the next generation will have the hindsight that enables one to say whether the current avant-garde wave is a break-through into a new art era, merely a temporary aberration - or the death rattle of a decadent culture. ■