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A Dance-Choreographer speaks: An Interview with James Cunningham

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Interviewer: Curtis L. Carter

James Cunningham is the artistic director of the Acme Dance Company.

Curtis Carter: Where in the scope of dance do you see your work?

James Cunningham: I thought for some time that what I really wanted to bring into my work was the idea that really everything that moves is dancing, and, therefore, I can include in what I do not only stylized movement (which is usually thought of as dance movement) but also natural movement, work movement, and the movement of prop, of films, of light. Behind it all is the idea that basically everything is moving, because everything is changing. Even rocks are very slowly moving as they erode. So it's a very large concept about what dance is. And where that fits into the scope of dance, I don't know. I mean, certainly, I find a lot of dancing boring, because it's too merely physical, and I find it emotionally and intellectually very limited. My desire has always been to create a form which integrates the body, the mind, the emotion. It is just in my nature as a person to do that. It's challenging to me. That's why yoga is so interesting to me, because it is concerned with doing just that. Having come from the theatre and having

acted and directed for a long time, I was sort of surprised when people thought what I was doing was really part of the mainstream of what had always been done in the theatre, the things that interested me in terms of total theatre—like the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare and Molière, all of which combined music, dancing, singing, acting. So I always think of what we're doing as just part of that, and in that context dance as it is usually thought of came to seem rather limited. Now that may have to do with the fact that many dancers are like athletes, and I was always a terrible athlete. I guess I was developing more emotionally and intellectually, and therefore when I realized very strongly that I wanted to dance and move, I certainly wanted to bring all that other personal resource into it. And it is true that the manipulation of the body is a thing in itself to many dancers. But this concept of total theatre is really what I conceive of in terms of dance.

Curtis Carter: How do you feel about ballet as a dance form today?

James Cunningham: I start out with the premise that people have always wanted to dance. This is one of the reasons I use rock music and rock dancing in my pieces because I want to keep it in touch with the natural folk dancing of this time. So, to move to your

a dance-choreographer speaks: an interview with james cunningham

question, I think ballet is a wonderful *technique*. It's a wonderfully clear and very thorough way of articulating the body. But I find most ballets a little frivolous and sort of irrelevant. Given its elegance and the whole eighteenth century feeling of style, I don't think it's able to deal with many aspects of life and feeling, which have arisen in this century. For instance, ballet definitely tends to be up into the air. It doesn't deal with earth energy, with the whole area of the pelvis, sexuality, all of that area which is so strong in America, and, I suppose that which the whole black culture has made us very, very aware of. Now at this time when blacks and whites are really beginning to integrate, I think it's very hard in the ballet style to deal with that whole lower register of earth, sex, that kind of thing.

Curtis Carter: How do your training methods for dancing differ from others?

James Cunningham: I very much believe in every class combining technique with improvisation. I have long felt that one of the real problem areas in dance training is the obsession with technique. It is stressed too much and is made sort of a be-all and end-all. It's like being in the army or being put into a child-parent situation. You are told what to do, and you then try to achieve it. I believe very strongly that every individual, at what-

ever age, should be encouraged to feel that he is a creative force, that he should have an opportunity to bring out his own natural movement. Therefore, I always improvise in my classes and I combine that with techniques for learning how to free and control both the body and the voice, because I think it's perfectly natural to combine movement and sound. We're constantly dancing on a certain level when we talk and gesture to each other. I think that to cut the voice out of dance is to limit it in a very strange way. In short, connected to my idea that really everyone is dancing, is the feeling that it should be perfectly natural to speak on the stage as part of a dance or to be able to make sounds, and for all this to be much more integrated. So, this is what I do in my classes, combining these techniques of sound and movement with improvisation. I think this may be rather different than the way dance classes were conducted in the thirties, forties, and fifties. But I think that what we're doing is very related to a lot of things that are going on now, especially in the United States. I'm talking about the strong interest in yoga and the interest in sensory awareness and the investigation into why people want to move, to sing, to do these things which all so-called primitive cultures are in touch with, although possibly not in the conscious way that we are at this point.

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James Cunningham. Photo by Lois Greenfield.

Curtis Carter: How do you go about choreographing a piece?

James Cunningham: I start with a problem I'm interested in working on because I find it challenging and because I think it would be challenging for the people involved in the piece. For instance I'm now working on a study of the play of opposites with each other. To that initial concept I have added certain images like the figures of Shiva and Sakti being married, the male and female principals of the cosmos. And so forth.

Curtis Carter: What do you as an artist wish to achieve through your work?

James Cunningham: I think definitely that there are several things. Primarily, to do what is challenging to my own development. I explore the things that are interesting to me, and then I try to think of things that would be interesting for the individuals in the company to do, and that would stretch them. As to what one wants to achieve, I think that this

is related partly to the whole educational aspect of the work which interests me very much—the going into colleges and also into high schools and public schools and actually encouraging people to explore the areas of themselves which in society are often repressed after you're a child. All children naturally sing and dance and then, when they grow up, the whole intellectual emphasis is so extreme that these other parts of themselves, the intuitive, the physical, the rhythmic, get to be neglected. And that's one of the things that I hope to achieve, especially through the work that I do that involves audience participation and working with groups of people.

Curtis Carter: Where do you find source material for making dances?

James Cunningham: Well, I think you just find it everywhere. That's the fun of making anything. You suddenly realize you have all this information that you've taken in from the time you were a child and that it's now available to you for use. I'm just beginning to read again **Howarzan** by Forester. Remember when he says at the very beginning, "only connect." Well, I think that's one of the things that's always fascinating about creating anything, that you find all these connections. You make them for yourself, and you make them for the people watching you. So I find in my pieces that music I heard years ago, or music I'd heard just the other day, or experiences I'd had as a child. I find in making these connections that both yoga and psychotherapy have been extremely useful for me. My experiences with them have really taken me into myself and helped me to open up—to see clearly what is inside me and what is outside. I'm in both private and group therapy and I find that extremely rewarding.

Curtis Carter: In pieces like **First Family** you use elements from Isadora Duncan, **Swan Lake**, Mae West, and other such popular sources. How do you regard these materials in their original form?

James Cunningham: As I just said a minute ago I think that I'm concerned with connecting things, and the whole eclectic nature of my work, combining many different styles of movement and music, comes from my predilection for seeing relationships between things that very often aren't thought of as belonging together. I'm aware that Mae West

might not like it at all if she found out I was using her in this dance and especially since she appears as a very grand cow in an evening dress. (But, of course, I love her.) When I said to you before that I feel very connected with Lewis Carroll, it is because he did exactly in the nineteenth century the sort of thing that I'm doing now, what all satirists do. You take certain things of the day and you turn them upside down and you show the whole ironic aspect of them and you also show the way they connect, how one thing ties in with the other. Of course, **Swan Lake**, Mae West, and Isadora all represent different forms of dance and so there is a relationship, and a logical juxtaposition.

Curtis Carter: What attitudes do you intend to convey towards these diverse elements?

James Cunningham: I think both sympathetic and ironic ones, because I think that there's always something a little funny about anybody who's doing something which somehow they're so absorbed in that they don't see anything else. It's a little funny that Mae West has insisted for seventy years on playing the femme fatale. I mean, there are other things in life. It is also funny to me to think of all those people lost in **Swan Lake**, forever hopelessly in love with each other. Especially it's ironic if you know ballet dancers as I do and realize that behind this great love of the prince for the princess is very often quite a different relationship—one where he is quite openly gay. I hope that it's also conveyed that I feel very sympathetic. I love all these things that I put in. I'm not putting them down. I'm not saying this is ridiculous.

Curtis Carter: What is dance to you?

James Cunningham: I think that I said what dance is to me at the beginning. Essentially everything that is moving is dancing to me—and everything is moving. Every single thing has sound waves. So that's it: dance is life. I just don't want to limit it any more than that. I want to be able to have the audience in the theatre and to lift off the roof of the theatre and have them see the stars—to see things moving in new and different perspectives, so that they can understand what they themselves are doing. As Forester said, to connect what they're doing with what's going on around them and realize that they're part of the dance of life, whether they're dancing on the stage

or whether they're going to the supermarket or brushing their teeth.

Curtis Carter: Where is dance in America going now?

James Cunningham: You probably really have a much better idea than I do, because I think when you're in it you're working from inside yourself essentially. Therefore, unless you're an imitator, you don't think, well, now I should do this because it is relevant. I think, however, that many of us do find that we are working in similar areas, because obviously there are certain things that are in the air now. The whole sensory awareness thing for one. The attitude toward sexuality is so much more open now. The gay thing and the new consciousness and openness of women.

Curtis Carter: What kind of audience do you like?

James Cunningham: I don't know. I think that I like all audiences. I mean, an audience is very important for the comic thing we're doing. Whether they understand it or not consciously, they are very much a part of the dance, because their response affects the whole rhythm of what happens. And that's one of the reasons I love doing comedy because it is so obvious that the audience is important and that they are making the event. They are just as important a part of the event as the performers.

Curtis Carter: Who do you admire in choreographers today?

James Cunningham: I certainly admire Yvonne Rainer. She's concerned with doing. She's very concerned with minimal movement, which interests me also very much, and with investigating very simple things like walking and running. She's just a very wide awake person and I love to watch her. I really admire Jerome Robbins, partly because he's dealt with so many different aspects of the theatre, not just confined himself to ballet but has done musicals, and many different kinds of things. He's directed as well. He's worked with actors. And I only wish he'd do something in which he combined all these things, because there's no doubt that he knows a great deal about the theatre. If he could, I think it would be excellent. And I also admire Martha Graham very much. I find her very mysterious and rather humorless, but I

think that she is a true theatre person. She really conceives of what she does in terms of the whole theatre. I'm talking about her awareness of lighting and set and costumes, and her ability to take the things that were interesting to her and find an objective correlative for them in myth, so that they become relevant to many people. I think it's admirable.

Curtis Carter: In your gym pieces you begin and end with a warm-up and include a place in the dance for everyone. Why?

James Cunningham: Well, because of what I've said before. I want very much to make clear to audiences that of course they are dancers and that they can dance and that it's a perfectly natural thing to do and to invite them to do that, because all children find it natural, until they start to be told that, well, only *this* is dance. Or, you can't dance unless you have dance technique or whatever, and I'm against that. I'm for encouraging people to react much more spontaneously and I find that when people stretch and warm up both vocally and physically, then they see something that we do for them. Physically, emotionally, and intellectually they've been brought to the state where they're tuned in to what's going to happen. It's not as if they just came in and were still worrying about their taxes or their love life or whatever. Then at the end when we dance to the rock music, we bring the energies together again the way we began it, centering all that has happened. And it's just a very good feeling. I like to do that. It's one of the things we do that I really feel good about.

Curtis Carter: What is the place of dance in education of children? What kind of dance training and dance experiences would you like to see developing?

James Cunningham: Well, of course, I think that dance is very important for young children and also in high schools and in colleges—and simply to keep awake that whole natural love of movement that children and young people have. I think that in England they are probably a little further ahead than we are here because in the primary schools there they teach Laban's methods. Laban is truly concerned with the roots of movement, the really basic reasons that all people at all times have been interested in movement. I think that in teaching his ideas

Maisie Paradocks, Acme Dance Co. Photo by Joel Gordon.

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about the different kinds of effort shapes—the whole experience and the whole range of movement through gliding, floating, ringing, pressing, thrusting, tapping, flicking—that children are encouraged to explore *their whole range*. One of the things I'm always doing is stressing to everyone that they have this huge range, vocally and physically, in terms of strength, in terms of delicacy, and that it's just waiting for them to play on it like a keyboard, and that it is silly to restrict themselves to just a little area. It reminds me of what my psychiatrist sometimes used to say to me. It was a quote from **Auntie Mame**: "Life is a banquet and most poor sons of bitches are starving to death." I think that's perfectly true. One is aware as a child that life is a banquet. Therefore, we should encourage children to improvise, to learn that using many forms of movement and sound can be a good thing. And then to teach technique with that, but always to put the stress on the creative energy of the individual and not just turn a child into a little soldier who imitates you doing pirouettes or whatever. I think that psychologically that just does not result in the freeing of the child's creative energy.

The real influence on me as a child, from the time I was about eight until I was about twenty-one, was a very amazing woman in Toronto whom I worked with. She was involved in doing very much what I'm interested in, this whole total theatre thing, involving singing and dancing and acting. She made a tremendous impact on me and on a number of other children. She reinforced my predilection as a child for just playing—for being different animals and different kinds of people and all of that. She was a major influence. Now as for others. As I said before, I definitely think of Lewis Carroll as a real influence. I love Alice and I see a great deal in those books. There is, too, the stimulus of yoga and psychotherapy, which I mentioned. And also the many things I learned in the theatre. I think Graham has had an influence on me. I love her sense of the whole world, and I love the passion of it. It gets to me, really—and more than, say, Merce Cunningham's work which I find much more intellectual and rather dry. And Shakespeare: I'm obviously not alone in seeing his great genius. □

Maisie Paradocks, Barbara Ellmann, dancer.
Photo by Joel Gordon.