

## The Grand Union: Our Gang

*Elizabeth Kendall*

As the audience files into a Grand Union performance, the group is already warming up, pacing the floor and trailing long cords of microphones. There is no buffer zone of quiet at the beginning, no moment when the lights go up on a world already imagined, a world which goes along by itself and leaves one free in the dark to find one's bearings. The Grand Union, made up of dancers and ex-dancers, is one of those groups which have found traditional theater artificial, therefore obsolete. Instead of catered gourmet entertainment, they offer us the pot-luck of the moment. They improvise. This ought to be exciting: a chance to view the show coming to life, since the show coming to life is the show. However, sometimes I wonder what I'm doing up there as one of the Grand Union's on-the-spot witnesses. The so-called performance is not directed to my imagination; it's directed to my sympathies. It's more like a real-life scene in the street or at a large party, which spreads out to include me, an innocent bystander. "Hey you, listen, am I right or is he right?" Grand Union performers are constantly buttonholing us with remarks from the floor, but unless we happen to be friends of theirs in real life, we're an entire audience of innocent bystanders. Of course we can get involved, but what do we get out of it?

Nevertheless, even though I've grown dubious, I'm going to write about the Grand Union; first because I used to think their performances were telling me things, and second because the group is still a flourishing phenomenon, having played four performances this April (22, 23, 24 and 25) to packed houses at La Mama Annex, with the usual stellar cast of Barbara Dilley, Nancy Green, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon; with, for the first time, Valda Setterfield (last seen on Merce Cunningham's stage); but without former key members Steve Paxton (he was away on a teaching engagement), Trisha Brown (she is concentrating on her own choreography) and Yvonne Rainer (she had planned to come back for two performances but pulled out on account of film commitments).

To say just what went on in these performances is difficult. I can

report that the first and third evenings were more "up" and alive than the other two, but that nothing in any evening was disastrously "off." In general, the Grand Union proved again that they can manufacture situations from the flimsiest of pretexts. For instance, as soon as the first night began, David Gordon was dropping dry leaves onto a seated Nancy Green, calling himself a dress designer. Their skit somehow crescendoed to an extravagant group procession, with Green carrying a crucifix, the others marching behind, and the Beatles wailing "Let It Be" from the record player. It was the high point of the evening. However, explaining this and other Grand Union high points is as risky as analyzing a rip-roaring dinner party or the pranks at summer camp (the night we all started mooing after we were supposed to be asleep). You can't quite do these things justice out of context. Rooting for the Grand Union is like running with the gang; you get carried away, you get a little foolish — a crucifixion procession, ha ha. After a night in which they have risen to these heights, you can say "You should have been there" to the people who weren't. These are the rewards of "live behavior," the name of the Grand Union show.

The flip side of "live behavior" is the waiting around; you do a lot of that, too, at Grand Union, no matter how live the evening eventually becomes. Sometimes a whole audience sits with wandering minds. At a regular dance concert our concentration is carefully fuelled, shaped and guided by the deliberate progression of the material. Here, the hit and miss methods induce a different frame of mind — not exactly boredom but a passive state like daydreaming. The performers are meandering about; the audience watches them and in another part of its mind idly reflects on their persons: when will Nancy Green get a haircut; Barbara Dilley has a fleshiness in the arms and legs, not unattractive; David Gordon looks good in black or white; Valda's face is like a crushed peony. . . . Ironically, these are the only private thoughts I take home after a Grand Union night. I can't have a serious response to the performers in their material, because even when some action gets underway the audience remains partly disengaged — because the performers are. The mood of irony is constant. Even the tenderest moments drift into parody because none of the dancers can permit himself any vigor or earnestness. That would mean that his material counted more than somebody else's, that he had seized control — an act which would violate the Grand Union's deepest intent. The Grand Union exists to release the expressive potential in dancers formerly constrained by the tyranny of a choreographer.

Yvonne Rainer, had she returned, might have been an uncomfortable sign the Grand Union has come full circle. She was once its choreographer; she thought it up. Now that Rainer has moved on to the world of experimental film, she has become a legend in the dance world: a very serious person who began to study technique at the unlikely age of twenty-five, made herself into a magnetic performer, and then ploughed it all under for a plain, bare, honest and uninflected kind of movement, a democratic dance



to fit our times. Of course, Rainer was among friends — the rest of the Judson Church choreographers of the sixties — but she was probably the most passionate one of them and the most scrupulous about her relations with the audience. She practically invented the new dance body, that *squarish and genderless* entity which came to inhabit Judson dances, which eschewed all airs and graces, all dips and bends and especially all traces of exhibitionist dance virtuosity. With this neutral character on the stage, Rainer ran no risk of prejudicing her audience. The bodies in her sixties task-inspired works, in which mattresses and other objects were carried about, constituted a sort of plebeian ballet corps with a deliberately limited range of action. The bodies in her later "Continuous Project Altered Daily" (1970) at Connecticut College were given more range and fewer restrictions; consequently, they came to life, they acquired moods and whims and facial muscles, and Rainer, who was never too easy pulling rank, handed over her authority to a collective, thus inaugurating the Grand Union. A thirty-four-minute film clip of "CPAD," showing these first efforts at collective choreography, is deadly dull; a camera roves among shyly smiling dancers balancing pillows on their heads. Still, it was a new beginning. Live behavior was to be the novel performance material; indecorous emotions, such as anger, were to be welcomed, improvisation was to elicit the many-faceted truth, and the sixties communal dream would flower on the dance stage.

The Grand Union wasn't just born out of expediency; Rainer herself was smitten by the communal dream, as she implies in a letter to two of her dancers (reprinted in her extremely interesting book, Work, 1961-73, Nova Scotia College Press, 1974):

I got a glimpse (in performance) of human behavior that my dreams for a better life are based on — real, complex, constantly in flux, rich, concrete, funny, focused, immediate, specific, intense, serious at times to the point of religiosity, light, diaphanous, silly and many-leveled at any particular moment.

The immensity of this wish, tragic in any era, registers today like a lament — not for the stage but for a whole society. Six years ago, all of life, we thought, was on the way to being transformed. Alternatives to every kind of stale institution — alternative schools and marriages and clothing and diets and manners and travel — were to be improvised. That word "improvisation" was on everyone's mind, and here was the Grand Union with the *echt* process. Probably the Grand Union has contributed a negligible amount to the growth of dance; it is much more a social phenomenon, evidence of a unique confluence of life and the theater in the late

sixties. Dance became a cult metaphor for an ideal that had been formulated over a decade — the fluid life (and it remains such if Jules Feiffer's cartoons are any indication). The youth of the suburbs, war babies born some twenty-odd years earlier and now a groundswell in the population, had spent the sixties breaking out of the molds prepared for them by industrious parents. They needed, or some of them needed, a mental picture of a new way to behave. Dance provided that — for me among others. I encountered dance on the way out of the sixties hippie culture. And it has been dance discipline which eventually brought me back into touch with a past and a future, although the process took a while.

In 1969, after a fiercely euphoric and communal time in the Harvard student rebellion, when it was gloriously revealed that things didn't have to be as they had always been, I found myself trying to improvise a life among sort-of-friends in California. I thought I might work with clay to supplement my book-learning. I tried a few psychedelic drugs. I hoped I was learning to be "open," but there was no logic to it from day to day. One confusing incident concerned a group of us tripping, interrupted by a knock at the door which was not, it turned out, the police. Had it been the police, said our unacknowledged leader after we had calmed down, we would have known just what to do — act normal. Our instincts, he had noticed, were alert; we were sensitive to each other — everyone contributing, no one commanding. This, right here, was the Revolution. It made me intensely sad, because I didn't even know these people very well; how could I act as one with them? After a time, I retreated dubiously back to Harvard, enrolling in the School of Education. Since nothing was decided in my mind, I thought I'd better work on my body, the only concrete fact I had. To be a dancer, a person who could land on his feet every time, was the only thing that seemed unqualifiedly desirable. And by a fluke — the Radcliffe teacher's sabbatical — Steve Paxton and Barbara Lloyd (now Dilley) of the Grand Union were two of my first teachers. In that context, they were superhuman figures: respected professionals from inside the field, former Merce Cunningham dancers who had put themselves voluntarily into the mainstream of radical life. Their very actions encouraged the dancer image I was so shyly courting for my own. They were engaged, they said, in transforming their own superior skills in response to ordinary people's needs. They were ordinary people, they said.

Steve Paxton's curriculum was a combination of robust feats and delicate sensations: a Japanese wrestling walk (on the knees); a headstand, since "everyone should know how to be upside down"; and then, puzzlingly, "the smallest possible stretch in the lower back." I didn't have a lower back after four months of dance training. He also introduced the name of Isadora Duncan and had us practice versions of her serpentine curves, more appropriate to the era, he implied, than Merce Cunningham's fleshless and mechanized exercises. Paxton, that brilliant, bold and slightly inhuman figure of Judson days, was not a natural teacher then. Beginning



students, like audiences, are eager to concentrate if someone gives them some material, but they are all too happy to put it off. Paxton's classes went over our heads because they were meant for other rebellious professionals instead of beginners. He didn't require work.

Dilley, even though she countenanced hours of talk about dance accoutrements — beans and grains for protein, cut-off sweat pants for comfort — had a mysterious and effective authority in the technical work. She had to justify this (authority was taboo in the alternative world), and she did — by gallantry. She danced, too. She never asked the troops to do anything she didn't do. She marked off squares on the floor for dance improvisation — solo, duo, and trio — and she encouraged exploration, leading the way. As a result of her good-will, something clicked open in my imagination and I saw 360 degrees of space — a perception I still draw on today. Dilley also taught us half of Yvonne Rainer's "Trio A," which seemed like a witty secret language, a kit of odd accessories; to do it was as satisfying as reciting "Jabberwocky." Apparently, there was a brotherhood of "Trio A" people if we ever got to New York, and a restaurant called Food. There was in fact Soho, a whole domain of dancers, those uncompromising creatures who owned only a pair of tennis shoes and a few personal icons (ready to double as stage props). If you were studying movement, you could call yourself a dancer. It meant you hadn't forgotten life was fluid and bodies were meant to run and jump. Dancers exuded freedom, and they could be recognized in the street by their somewhat scornful air.

In the euphoria, the connection, at least in my world, between "professional" and "dancer" or "choreographer" was obscured. College professors were arguing about whether rigor and history were necessary to knowledge; the concept of a dance consciously constructed on a stage and reflecting its own past disappeared from mass consciousness. My own impression of the stage, I am ashamed to say, was of a frame for everyday random actions. Putting these actions — walking, running, staring, etc. — on the stage would cause the audience to see themselves; it would clue them in, poor insensitive souls, to the glory of their own physicality. Furthermore, if the choreographer had a dramatic temperament, he could add symbols from a wide array of myths, including American rural, to the pure and neutral movement. I began a solo, costumed in an old pink and brown crêpe dress and carrying a suitcase, but the choreography always bogged down after the entrance. I didn't have a clue about how to render anything theatrical. Choreographing was supposed to be a skill one had possessed unawares all one's life, like the bourgeois gentleman's prose style. Performing, not choreographing, was the real ordeal. The picture-frame stage then turned into a testing ground whereon one danced something like a rite of passage into artistic adulthood. This was a lonely, thankless task, so one brought into one's dance certain trusted objects or pieces of clothing from real life, to keep one company onstage. I favored a watering

can as a prop. It would metaphorically fertilize the metaphoric ground of the stage — and there have since been dances with watering cans so employed.

I was a dance illiterate — we all were. Creating implied no attention whatsoever to the past. The illusion was that one needed only to be drunk — or drugged — on the principle of simultaneity, on the surplus of coincidental meanings lying thickly about in the air. If ordinary life is an orgy of awakened perceptions, the stage can only hope to offer more of the same. Theater is then the audience's consciousness of random overlaps: moments like the paths of two dancers crossing in our vision. That was all we thought we needed. The facts of dance history appeared like a series of islands — the nearest was Merce, then the New Dance Group, then José, Martha, Doris, and way in the distance the little mainland of ballet. We were located in a rowboat somewhere in the open sea, rowing away from it all. We went to formal concerts out of some conscious deference: four years ago, the Graham company seemed like a relic from an ancient civilization (the 1940s); Cunningham's dancers were admirable to watch but rarefied; even the Grand Union was an enigma in performance, I found, when I first saw them early in the seventies (in a Greene Street loft in midwinter). The parts I liked best were fanciful, when Dilley and Gordon promenaded like a king and queen. But where was the real-life drama, the proven relationships, the moments of embarrassment? Where, in short, was the live behavior? Yvonne Rainer alone stood out. She repeatedly bellowed for her lost eyeshade and that was unforgettable — the only time I've ever seen a passionate performance on the Grand Union stage.

Since that time just four years ago, categories all along the dance spectrum have blurred. Then, dance audiences sat down with a point of view about the old and the new, about formal and informal ways to do things. Merce Cunningham was unmistakably avant-garde, but he stood for a professional formality in which dancing was different from living. In light of his influence, Grand Union was indeed innovative when it first presented live behavior on the stage. But now, the Grand Union dancers are the elders of the avant-garde which has become synonymous with all of modern dance. Today's audiences shift their scale of judgment with every performance; they take anybody's experiments as text and find meanings. And today's younger choreographers employ improvisation, found movement, impromptu speech, old clothes and cherished possessions frequently and unconsciously. "Themes and dynamics from everyday life," says the description in *The Dance Calendar* of one new company's material. The phrase could apply to any. Yet, although the aesthetic wind has shifted in all directions, the Grand Union holds fast to its original ideology, which is that improvisation is a revolutionary and deadly serious method. The purpose of each of their performances is to demonstrate once again what every ex-sixties revolutionary has to believe: that the group has the



resources within it to meet a crisis — even an artificial crisis like the attention of an audience. In the manner of my California friends, the Grand Union is after a situation in which the group dynamic can come to the rescue. That still counts more with them than what the audience sees. The audience will always see something. "Whatever is happening we act on it and it becomes theater because there's an audience there," said David Gordon in a 1974 discussion among Grand Union and critics, reprinted this spring in the Soho Weekly News. Is it merely the simultaneous presence of audience and performers, both innocent of preconceptions, which is revolutionary? "If we were doing equivalent work in painting or sculpture," said Gordon in this same interview session, "we would be dealt with as revolutionaries. Instead we are dealt with as light entertainment."

Some of the press has dealt with the Grand Union as likely representatives of whatever revolution may be still in the air. Audiences, however, have not been moved to raise the performers on their shoulders and carry them at the head of a procession. After a good evening, the most the audience can muster is a few chuckles on the way out. "Light entertainment" does seem an accurate way to characterize the Grand Union's work in its present phase. Improvisation is a gamble by its very definition; but these recent performances of the group have made it all too clear that there is no more risk in the game. All the members are somewhat famous and beloved in their own right; they reveal nothing surprising in their performances except maybe a little personal embarrassment if they are caught off-guard. Even that is now expected by audiences; it's not genuine embarrassment. Only irony, self-mockery, and occasional coquetry are real, it seems. "The Grand Union is into a crowd-pleasing trip," said Yvonne Rainer censorially in a 1973 Art Forum interview. One wonders if the Grand Union was ever serious, instead of just, at times, grim. One wonders if repeated improvisation, in performance (improvisation will always be useful to choreographers in composition), can sustain anything more than shallow caricatures. The Grand Union are now playing pop versions, cartoons, of themselves. They use the stage as a place to confess — small weaknesses. Perhaps they intend these bourgeois archetypes they have evolved as a catharsis for the audience, a means to show us to our corrupt selves so that we may repent?

Unfortunately, this plan doesn't work because the theater requires a seriousness of the most unselfconscious kind. The Grand Union, improvising, is always watching the audience watch them. And their conception of the total honesty due their audiences has been their downfall, I fear. It has bred a verbalizing compulsion into the performances. Throughout a performance, someone is constantly commenting on the action: what just happened, what could have happened. A sort of communal voice-over, rotated among the five, clues us in to this ironic self-awareness. But the commentary takes the spring out of the material — out of the very rhythm of the improvised progressions. For the performers, the easiest response

to a moment is always to say something, and the audience comprehends this faster than any silent demonstration. If there is talking and dancing going on at the same time (a frequent Grand Union phenomenon), the audience automatically selects the talk as the thread to follow. This is involuntary, I think. But the whole show feels unzipped as a result of too much talk. The talking urge may also arise from a defiance of Merce Cunningham which some members of the Grand Union still haven't put to rest. Cunningham's theater isolates the dancer from the sound. It forbids the performer even to respond to sound as ballet dancers respond to music. Consequently, it calls forth a supersonic concentration in the audience. We perceive the dance rhythm and the sound rhythm as independent elements — and each is keener. For the dancers, though, it must be wearing to be treated as deaf-mutes. A self-appointed task of Cunningham defectors like Dilley and Paxton, along with a whole post-Cunningham generation (Meredith Monk, Laura Dean, etc.), has been to explore the dancer as a source of sound. Dilley has perfected the arts of gibberish, whistling, and clapping, and employs them lavishly to Grand Union ends. But speech — remarks, questions, verbal teasing — belong to a different rhythmic sphere from dancing or even from musical sounds. I feel that the speech of the Grand Union is constantly breaking in on the listening faculties of an audience trying to concentrate on the dance rhythms.

Spoken material, in fact, determines the order of a Grand Union performance. No doubt it's easier that way. The dancers' speaking selves, these stock characters, are ready to take over when the inspiration gets thin. This season, Gordon was the self-mocking stand-up comic, the sensitive hyper-verbal boy addicted to the limelight; Nancy Green was the wry, dopey one with the clever, world-weary remarks; Barbara Dilley was the moralizer who sternly checked for hypocrisy; and Douglas Dunn and Valda Setterfield, throughout most of these evenings, were the dummies. They generally spoke only when spoken to: Dunn because he likes to play the loner (stalking in the shadows and wearing low-brimmed hats), Setterfield because she is naturally polite on the stage. Since these predictable roles tend to expand on a weak evening, my rough notes from the fatigued second performance (Evening #2) arranged themselves in a sort of cabaret format:

#### Evening #2

Prelude: walkaround . . . . . The Company  
Clapping patterns . . . . . Barbara Dilley  
Monologue: "Everything's Running Smoothly". . . . Nancy Green  
Gibberish with microphone . . . . . Barbara Dilley  
Solo (Douglas is such a card). . . . . Douglas Dunn  
— (in BVD's)  
Reprise: Gibberish. . . . . All







Singing Stone," from a book about the Plains Indians, the story of a young girl's symbolic journey into adulthood. She read it in a lovely sing-song voice which hypnotized the audience and performers into quiet. The others on stage gradually moved a whole array of props down the room, shifting Dilley and her chair from time to time back to the center of the props. I felt then that Barbara Dilley was peacefully projecting her keenest powers.

When a Grand Union performance takes on a symmetry like this series of solos, it acquires what it was meant to have: spontaneous shape, effortless balance, mysterious extra dimensions. Each performer has enough individual space to implement his or her full range. Those times are all too rare in Grand Union evenings, though; one usually has to throw away two hours to get three or four minutes. The surprise is that these four minutes are like the ones in any powerful theater. Perhaps this thought leads to a rediscovery that theatrical "live behavior" is different from live "live behavior. It has led me to just that conclusion. The theatricalizing of an event removes the static, the waiting around, the bolloxed-up signals. It builds a momentum artificially, but a momentum is what reaches the audience as individuals. The proper business of actors, says Virginia Woolf, is "to intensify and solidify my impressions." This certainly applies to dancers as well, and why not to whatever hybrid the Grand Union take themselves to be? Ironically, the most thrilling picture of "live behavior" I've ever seen on the stage belongs to one of the oldest ballets in the Western repertory — Bournonville's "The Guards of Amager" (1871), recently presented on the Met stage by the Royal Danish Ballet. A scene in a country inn showed people old and young running, dancing, eating, serving tables, playing the piano, falling down, flirting. The mimed material was entirely pre-arranged in sophisticated counterpoint and its rhythmic clarity enabled the dancers to execute it wholeheartedly.

The most artificial kinds of theater are sometimes the most spontaneous. Grand Union dancers can never trust the show to flow along by itself; therefore they can never throw themselves into it — aim, attack, and produce the emotional force of tears or rage or hilarity. The means to produce and transmit emotions between stage and audience has been the elemental stuff of the theater from the earliest Greek plays. Grand Union's theatrical revolution was supposed to increase the humanness. But for all they may wish it, the vapors floating back and forth across their stage are not emotions, they are whims and half-impulses and are not even the best the performers can give us. Isn't David Gordon's comic persona fresher in his own dances? Doesn't Douglas Dunn in his own works dance better, when he's had time to invent something besides hops from right to left? Because nothing is sustained for very long among the Grand Union, time erases itself every few minutes. No connections are made backward and forward, in time, except through references to earlier moments in the actual performance or earlier nights in that same season. In the context of this a-cultural bias, Valda Setterfield's "Sleeping Beauty" number was

daring and generous. It brought to the audience a sudden, welcome cross-illumination: this is now; "Sleeping Beauty" was then; together they make a new amalgam. My final objection to the Grand Union is to its poverty of resonance. I can state that Barbara Dilley reminds me of Fokine, but what of it? She doesn't intend the connection. Therefore, my perception has nothing to do with hers; therefore, we aren't communicating. What I'm watching is undeniably live behavior, but after these few years with Grand Union, that behavior just wafts by me. In the audience I fidget and my blood runs slow. I want something to happen, somebody to commit himself, some striking power of mind or body to stand forth. Grand Union produces a theatrical vacuum wherein I crave its opposite: a vigorous mind behind the stage, a choreographic mind at ease with its material and unashamed of having chosen it, and performers who dive into the material because they know it so well.

The sixties brought a personal awakening to me and lots of people. We woke to our senses, to our complicated organisms, and our attention was distracted from anything beyond that. But how long can you watch just yourself? I almost got cut off at the stem. I almost forgot that my generation was not isolated and that certain theatrical traditions can speak to me now. In fact, the theater has the power to bring lost times alive again and, by contrast or correspondence, to define where we are now. It seems to me that the urgent business of the moment is to make connections.