



GRAND UNION



THE GRAND UNION - page 1

The Grand Union came into being in the fall of 1970 to fulfill the individual and collective needs of a group of people who had been variously associated as friends, choreographers, and performers for as many as ten years. It performed at Douglas College, the Smithsonian Institute, and New York University, then did three benefits for the Committee to defend the Black Panthers at New York University and St. Peter's Church. During January and February it did six performances at a loft on 13 St. In May the group was in residence for 5 days at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. A series of performances in Paris is tentatively scheduled for the fall of 1972.

The work is collaborative in that ideas can be contributed by anyone, although in performance it is not always easy to attribute responsibility for given segments and details. Since all of the performers are trained dancers, the emphasis is on movement. However, there are props and costumes used which, when combined in various ways, can produce an intensely imagistic theater. Much of the work is improvised in performance, the feeling being that the familiarity and confidence established in rehearsals provides a solid ground for spontaneous behavior and inspiration in performance. Things like costumes and objects are usually pre-arranged. An ongoing, constantly changing approach to work results in no two performances being alike. Sometimes the evening seems to be about fun and games; sometimes it is solemn and highly symbolic. Sometimes it is hard to characterize. In this respect the Grand Union seems to be more about process and involvement and transition than any fixed view of art and theater.

The nature of the group continues to change. Temporary absences (due to travel, draft, individual concert and teaching commitments) and sudden reappearances affect the work radically. The basic premise seems to be that the situation must be flexible enough to accommodate individual needs at any given time, whether they be about performance, creativity, directorship, or working alone. Currently we are thinking about organizing many of the ideas and images that emerged this winter into a new structure - partially set and partially improvised. The pendulum swing from anarchy, through "modified

democracy," to oligarchy, and back again is being carefully observed by all of us.

At this point our names are Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn, Nancy Green, Dong, Becky Arnold, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Barbara Lloyd.

EPISODES FROM GRAND UNION PERFORMANCES

On the mat, with precocious sense of performance, a young girl from the audience slowly rolled and stretched. The entire Grand Union was meanwhile showing a bit of Trisha's material. Milling in a crouched position at one end of the space, they would begin to cross it together, accelerating to a fast bent kneed walk, reaching out in expansive unison gesture. Reaching a peak of speed and stretch half way across, they would decelerate and close in on themselves, returning to the nervous crouch, then repeat with minor variation in the opposite direction. Accidentally they became corps to the young girl's solo.

The above was repeated at a later performance incorporating an idea of Steve's: that the only source of illumination be candles attached to hats worn by all the performers. Nancy brought a whole candleabra mounted on a sombrero.

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Steve and several friends came and set a table with candles and flowers and food. They sat down and ate in mirror image with their dinner partner across the table. After awhile they left. Barbara brought the large rope over and made a circle with it on the floor. Standing in the circle she slowly changed her clothes from black to white, then sat down. After awhile she stood, moved the rope circle to another place and sat down again for awhile; then moved again.

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We decided to move the huge tumbling mat. Someone suggested music. Steve went over to the record player and selected Debussy's L'Après-midi, then we all slowly began to roll up the mat. We rolled over it; it became a wave and we tumbled and fell. The music continued after the mat was rolled up. We sat on it and slid off it slowly. Then Trisha and Barbara got chairs and a large foam rubber mat, placed the mat on the chairs, climbed on it and slid off - slowly. Dripped off it, sunk off it, letting their weight go until they fell to the floor, then got up and did it again.

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Barbara and Yvonne agreed before the performance to do a "fight." At a certain point they took a strip of foam rubber into the center. Yvonne pushed Barbara in a mock-aggressive fashion. Soon they were wrestling, grunting, pulling, rolling, tugging at the mat, each other's limbs, and clothing. Nancy joined in the clothing-pull. Later we were surprised that certain audience members thought it was all for real.

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Group starts with the problem: Must move fast, maintaining a line formation while carrying and passing numerous props - a thick 5-foot rope, a 10-pound medicine ball, 4 pillows, a large stuffed round object with a leg attached, a 5-foot long wooden pole, a folding chair, a black overcoat, a plastic raincoat, a bolt of pink tubular jersey cloth. We start to move, trying to keep all of the objects in motion and at the same time attached to ourselves. We trip, fall down, get up, drag each other down and up, keep moving even as the "line" begins to disintegrate. The bolt of cloth unwinds. Soon we are pulling and tugging at an amorphous mass of bodies and objects in a vain effort to keep "moving." Steve meanwhile has disappeared into the pink tube and is engaged in a lonely struggle to reach the other end. Yvonne's interest in the whole procedure wains, and she goes to the tape recorder to put on a tape of Satie's Gymnopédie orchestrated by Debussy and played by the Boston Philharmonic. She then dons a pre-arranged costume:

red rubber finger sleeves from the stationery store and Kleenex-box "shoes." Steve meanwhile has emerged nude and quivering from the pink cloth, having finally shed both clothes and cloth. The metaphorical effect is powerful. He dances a slow, sensuous dance - arms widespread, torso moving gently. Barbara joins him, doing a version of her own while facing him. The music ends. Barbara walks to one end of the space, disrobes, rewinds the tape, and - nude - returns to her original position. They repeat the dance. Yvonne meanwhile has been doing a quasi-Kathakali number, standing on one leg, gesticulating with rubber-capped fingers. Her motions at times take her very near to Steve and Barbara. The boxes of Kleenex are abandoned as they fall from her feet, leaving pieces of tissue between her toes.

OBSERVATIONS BY OTHERS re THE GRAND UNION

"The Grand Union is a group. It is also a collection of individuals who never lose their identity. Movements, manipulations, language, interactions, conflicts, agreements, humor and pathos. Theater without theatrics. Always art but close to life; as much life in the art as possible; more life than anything else around that is art. The Grand Union's relation to "dance" is what a construction site is to the engineer's drawing board. Weight and gravity and balance, precariousness and fatigue - all the concrete determinants and contingencies of the human body in relation to the floor, objects, gravity, and other bodies are constantly in view. The performances are not about the conditions of our existence and interactions with the world. Rather the performances embrace these conditions at every moment. It is an art that is not abstract or formal or estheticized or transcendent. One sees an unsettling kind of "work" going on that lies between existence and action. Very little art can do this."

Robert Morris