GRAND UNION: TAKING A CHANCE ON DANCE

BY ROBB BAKER

In a solo performance in 1969, Trisha Brown walked out on stage and announced to her audience, "I want you to yell **yellow belly** at me." She kept egging the crowd on until they responded as requested, with jeers and catcalls and loud shouts of the proposed phrase, which means "coward" in good old American slang. And then she danced to the taunts. As she now explains it, "I was playing with the whole concept of being booed onstage. I got them to do what I feared most—from the very beginning. My movement was totally improvised. The only thing I knew for sure ahead of time was that I was going to stand on my head and give them the finger."

"Yellow Belly Dance" is an interesting forerunner of the performance philosophy of Grand Union, an improvisational dance company formed about a year later (in the fall of 1970), with Ms. Brown and eight other dancer/choreographers making up its membership. Grand Union likewise toys with the dangers performers face in confronting a possibly hostile public (and the corresponding self-trust necessary to deal with such a situation), with the subtleties and vagaries of performer/audience interaction, with improvised movement (incorporating, in this case, one preplanned "bit"), with calling on the collective memory of audience and performer alike (the "yellow belly" reference), with making performing itself (instead of a story or pretty visuals) the focus of a performance.

Multiply Trisha's "Yellow Belly Dance" by six (there being, at present, six active members of Grand Union), keeping in mind not just arithmetic progression, but the geometric range of possible new relationships as well (five dancers relating to one dancer; four dancers relating to two dancers; one dancer relating to another at the left side of the stage, while a third dancer relates to the remaining three at the right side of the stage; all six dancers relating individually to the audience; etc., etc., etc.)—and you begin to get an idea of what an exploratory improvisational concert by Grand Union can be like.

Not that it always works, as Grand Union members are the first to admit. When you play with chance, you also risk failure. Improvisation is always a gamble, and sometimes Grand Union does lose. The audience may on occasion go away bored if, on some particular night, the chemistry doesn't work or the improvisation simply fails to come off.

Yet such a case is the exception rather than the rule. And many Grand Union audiences come back, rather regularly, because they find something uniquely personal/universal about the Grand Union experience. As Barbara Lloyd, another member of the present group, puts it: "Among the particular set of New York artists with whom most of us are associated, Grand Union represents a kind of [dramatized] human community. We provide a kind of collective psyche that individual—and very individualistic—artists can identify with. We're objects of curiosity and fascination. Every audience member experiences Grand Union individually, just the way every Grand Union member himself experiences the group individually. There is no easy description of who we are."

At left: Time-out at a Grand Union concert? Not really. Grand Union performances usually begin before the audience arrives and are so structured that even when one of the performers announces "Intermission" or "The End," you more than likely are not supposed to believe it. The three bodies here are Barbara Lloyd (mostly on bench), Steve Paxton (mostly on floor) and Nancy Green (partly on bench, partly on Steve). (Photo: Cosmos)

I. PERFORMERS TOGETHER

This spring Grand Union presented its most extensive New York season to date, offering seventeen company performances (plus several solo appearances by members of the group) and sponsoring various other music and dance concerts during two months of residence at the Dance Gallery on East Fourteenth Street.

Six performers participated in this set of Grand Union programs: Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn, Nancy Green, David Gordon, Barbara Lloyd and Steve Paxton. Yvonne Rainer, the dancer/choreographer out of whose dance company Grand Union originally sprang, appeared briefly in two of the seventeen concerts, but, as she herself stressed in a conversation following the final performance, her own energy at that time was being channeled into her own activities, not those of Grand Union's Dance Gallery series. The two other original members of the group, Becky Arnold and Dong, have now left the company.

The six members of Grand Union involved in the series come from varied backgrounds (different birthplaces, different astrological signs, different paths to dance). But they do share certain significant pre-Grand Union experiences. All studied regularly with Merce Cunningham at one time or another, and three of them (Steve, Barbara and Doug) have been members of the Cunningham company. All six spent summers (at various times) at the Connecticut College American Dance Festival—where most of them objected to the rigidly set up composition courses taught by Louis Horst and his followers. Trisha, Steve and David (along with Yvonne) later took a very different, far more experimental composition course offered by Bob and Judith Dunn at the Cunningham studio back in New York—and participated as choreographer/performers in the now-famous dance concerts by students of that class at Judson Church (Barbara also danced in some of the Judson works, though she did not present any of her own choreographies there).

In 1966, Rainer choreographed a work entitled "Trio A," with Steve, David and herself featured. The piece became part of a longer work called "The Mind Is a Muscle" (which had another section that Barbara was in). Doug joined the Rainer company for "Rose Fractions," Yvonne's contribution to the Billy Rose Theatre avant garde dance series in 1969. Rainer also took her whole company to Connecticut College that summer, where they began working on a flexible piece entitled "Continuous Project—Altered Daily."

Doug describes that work as follows: "There was no question as to the direction that 'Project' was taking as a piece—choreographically and emotionally. Things had started out very precise, very cool. Then literally tiny bit by tiny bit, things began to change. Yvonne encouraged our playing around with the material. More and more of the structures opened up; improvisation began to creep in. By the time of the Whitney Museum concerts in 1970, this was in full swing. Yvonne had begun to let us choose the order of the bits. She was being challenged, again and again, and little by little she turned loose the reins. But she worked **with** the challengers all along—and upped their antes. 'O.K. So you want to do **that**,' she would say. 'You can. Fine. But not only that, you have to do **this** as well.'"

Steve has interestingly chronicled (in an article on Grand Union in the September 1972 Drama Review) how Yvonne carefully controlled the dissolution of her own leadership: "Rainer began accepting dates at times when dancers were not always available in New York for rehearsal, and, using this exigency as a creative issue, created partial forms to be completed in performance." He relates how the individual dancers were then allowed to order the pre-set sections, to bring in their own music or props, and, finally, to insert their own bits of choreography while throwing out parts of the original. "The development that Rainer's particularly orderly mind evolved began to function as a valuable exercise for the company" (in such areas as role playing, how to build mutual trust and how to make artistic decisions). "When Rainer had ritually merged her separate ego with those of the company via 'Continuous Project—Altered Daily,' they had reached the beginning of Grand Union."

The new company (so named by David Gordon: "We specifically wanted something without **dance** in it as our name") beautifully exemplified what critic Jill Johnson had described two years earlier as the "dance underground": "The new choreographers are outrageously invalidating the very nature of authority. The thinking behind the work goes beyond democracy into anarchy. No member outstanding. No body necessarily more important or more beautiful than any other body. No movement necessarily more important or more beautiful than any other movement. It is, at last, seeing beyond our subjective tastes and conditioning, always admittedly operative, to a phenomenological understanding of the world."

As Steve points out, each member of the group-to-be realized what was happening at separate, individual times. Near the end of the evolution, Trisha, Nancy and Dong were invited to join what was still ostensibly Yvonne's group, but what was in actuality the budding of a new leaderless, improvisational dance company (with Yvonne simply a member/contributor, like all the others).

Initially there was predictable confusion as to direction (who would make artistic decisions in a group that was all leaders? when? how?). Doug describes it: "The beginnings were very awkward. We tried to make a work where everyone contributed a phrase, so that for a while, it was semi-structured work. This led to complete improvisation—on-the-spot decisions based on our own familiarity with each other and our experience of having performed together. Our improvisation is still about making decisions, setting limits." The improvisation structure perhaps was self-determined to "go all the way." As David puts it, "There's no such thing as a little freedom."

II. PERFORMERS ALONE

"Without exception," Steve Paxton says, "we each do very different work alone or in other groups than we do in Grand Union. Each social or artistic configuration we participate in produces a different head."

Steve himself has choreographed and performed extensively in other groups. He grew up in Arizona, took gymnastics and modern dance (Graham technique) there, moved to New York and studied with Limón and Cunningham, joining the latter's company from 1961 to 1965. He took the Dunns' composition course and began to make his own dances, employing chance, picture scores, animals onstage, nudity, everyday activities (such as walking), plastic inflatables and other props, videotape and film, outdoor and non-proscenium environments, non-trained dancers, experiments with space and time perspectives, minimal movement, sports-related movement, and verbal accompaniment (often spoken material relating to the dance movement being performed onstage at the same time).

Jill Johnson, who wrote extensively of Paxton's early career, said of him in a New York Times article: "Paxton

(over)

GRAND UNION (Cont'd)

takes the most extreme liberated positions. He likes people for what they are and believes in their physicality (their shape and way of moving) for what it is."

Steve presented two non-Grand Union programs during the Dance Gallery series: a solo concert and a performance with another improvisational dance group, called Contact Improvisation and based in Bennington, Vermont, where he teaches at Bennington College. The latter program contrasted the actual performance ("live" and three-dimensional and "in color") with simultaneous video images of the same actions on two TV monitors (in flat, black-and-white, limited-by-the-camera-range perspective).

In his solo concert, Steve presented several old and new pieces. The most striking of the latter was "Air," a juxtaposition of four separate screen images: a videotape of Paxton in performance; a hard-core pornographic movie; a film of Ulanova in "Swan Lake;" and Richard Nixon, live on network television making his April 30 excuses about Watergate (it being mere chance that the speech came the night of the concert). The cross-cutting of images and ideas that resulted were truly amazing: the sexist attitudes of the pornographer (and the classical choreographer) directly alongside of the fascist ends-justify-the-means apologia of Nixonian politics; a woman being forced into a degrading fellatio situation while Nixon speaks of "the integrity of the men who run for that office" and sings the praises of the men he has just fired for their gross breaches of integrity; Nixon mouthing more platitudes about "the majority of people in government are really good people" while the pornographer clearly revels in seeing the female sex-object subjected to the further degradation of ruthless anal entrance. The speech ends with Nixon's ludicrous statement about there being "no whitewash at the White House," while on the other video screen (where earlier we'd seen Steve dancing) is the image of an ocean shoreline, wave upon wave washing in, covering up everything in the water's path.

Trisha Brown grew up in Washington state ("just a regular, white middle class family—an older brother and sister"). She came to dance from a background in athletics ("my brother got me started in that") and, as far as early dance training went, "took the regular—toe and tap and jazz and acrobatics—mainly acrobatics." After one year at Mills College in California, she went to the dance festival at Connecticut College for the summer (where she took a composition course in which the instructor "seemed to want to keep dance from making a compositional first—everything had to be established by the music or other art forms") and then returned to Mills, from which she graduated with a degree in dance.

Her first job was teaching dance at Reed College in Oregon ("I taught out everything I'd learned at college in about three months and then began to improvise"). In January 1961, she caught a bus in Aberdeen, Washington, and headed for New York City.

There, through Simone Forti, a dancer whom she'd met at Ann Halprin's summer workshop in California in 1959, she got into the Dunns' composition class and began making "structured improvisations and highly personal solos—the movement of which has never been seen before or since." Next came what David Gordon recalls as "some really tough dances"—pieces involving simple leaning and falling and apparent gravity defiance (walking on walls, etc.). Several involved verbal material, and many of the pieces were based on the "trust" operative that later became so vital to Grand Union. ("It's a combination of daring and a built-in safety factor. Like when my son was small: I'd let him walk on any ledge he wanted to—but I'd always be there to catch him if he fell.")

Trisha's most recent works have been performed in various locations around New York. "Accumulations," at the Sonnabend Gallery, was just what its title implied—an accumulation of gesture sequences, with each dancer adding another movement phrase each time through (Anna Kisselgoff of the New York Times termed an earlier version of the piece "a kinetic equivalent of songs such as 'A Partridge in a Pear Tree'"). Trisha's contribution to City Center's park series this summer opened with four women lying on their backs (when I saw it, it was in high grass in a meadow of Central Park, so that the four could not see each others' movements), repeating a unison movement sequence over and over—completely nonplussed as two men (Doug Dunn and David Gordon) picked them up and transported them from environment to environment (a park bench, a concrete sidewalk, the area around the foot of a tree, etc.). In "Roof Piece," Trisha placed fifteen dancers, all wearing red, on fifteen separate rooftops in Soho and had them relay movement patterns, one by one, from the roof of Trisha's own building at West Broadway and Prince Street to just north of the World Trade Center some ten blocks away.

Nancy Green moved from New Jersey to California to Rhode Island during early childhood, ending up at Connecticut College (and in Cunningham's class there) in 1958. She comes from a musical family (her brother Peter is a composer at the University of Iowa; her mother plays the cello and sings; her father also composes and did much "to instill the whole creative musical atmosphere of our house—I grew up hearing everything from Dixieland and jazz to classical to rock").

After the summer in Connecticut, Nancy moved to New York City and began classes at Juilliard (with Limón), as well as continuing to work with Cunningham. She danced with Lucas Hoving, Anna Sokolow and Jack Moore, and her first concert of solo works was at the Cubiculo in 1971 (featuring pieces choreographed by Jack Moore and Remy Charlip, as well as by three persons she was associated with in Grand Union: Steve, David and Yvonne).

She has long had an interest in improvisation ("I'd always felt this natural tendency toward it, but just had never found anyone to perform with"), and now also performs solo improvisations and collaborations with a combined free-form music and dance group called the Collected Works. Her performances at the Dance Gallery were a collaboration with tenor sax player Richard Peck ("Barbara danced that night, too, and we had invited a few artists, telling them to show films, bring their own works or whatever. The place was filled with chaotic energy from all those different media. It was even harmonious at times! I loved it.") and several evenings as part of the Collected Works (a fascinating group, exhibiting a kaleidoscopic, fluid range of movements and relationships: first the dancers lead and the musicians play off them; then the focus for the cues changes, and on and on; there are solos, duets, trios—all sorts of harmonic and counterpointed relationships between the movers and the sounders).

The lone New York native among the present Grand Union members, David Gordon avoided dance until he got to Brooklyn College, where he was a fine arts major. The curriculum included courses in photography, sculpture and wood-carving as well as painting: "My training had very little to do with drawing a line from here to there. I had teachers like Max Ernst's son and Ad Reinhardt, and the courses were much more concerned with looking around you. Instead of seeing material as something used only for self-expression, I become aware of material itself and of how I could manipulate it and change its reality."

While at Brooklyn, David took dance classes at the college and choreographed his first work, a pas de deux, there. At the same time he began performing with James Waring (who undoubtedly exerted a strong influence on David's own tongue-in-cheek outrageousness, so integral a part of his contributions to Grand Union). In 1959 he went to Connecticut College, where he studied technique with Graham and Cunningham and composition with Horst: "He made us work in prescribed forms. We had to make a pavanne one day; he described it as 'a stately dance with a one-word title.' So I got up and did mine—and then told him it was called 'The Spastic Cheerleader.' He quit calling my name in class after that." (After recounting the humor of the anecdote, David grew more serious in analyzing the Connecticut composition class: "When I was an art student, any spark of creativity was promoted. Not there.")

David had met his wife, Valda Setterfield of the Cunningham company, in 1958 when both of them were in a James Waring piece. He made two dances for Waring's composition class the following year: "a sexist dance called 'Mama Goes Where Papa Goes,' for Valda and me, and a solo for myself, 'Honey Sweetie Dust Me,' which I did in blackface to an old Folkways record. I guess you'd have to call that a racist dance. My first two dances—one sexist and one racist."

He choreographed several works for the initial Judson season ("my first improvisational and my first drag pieces came during that period") and did a couple of more works with Valda that year and the next, then "stopped making dances" completely following negative response to a piece entitled "Walks and Digressions" in 1966 (though he had begun performing with Rainer that year and continued to work with her until the evolution of Grand Union).

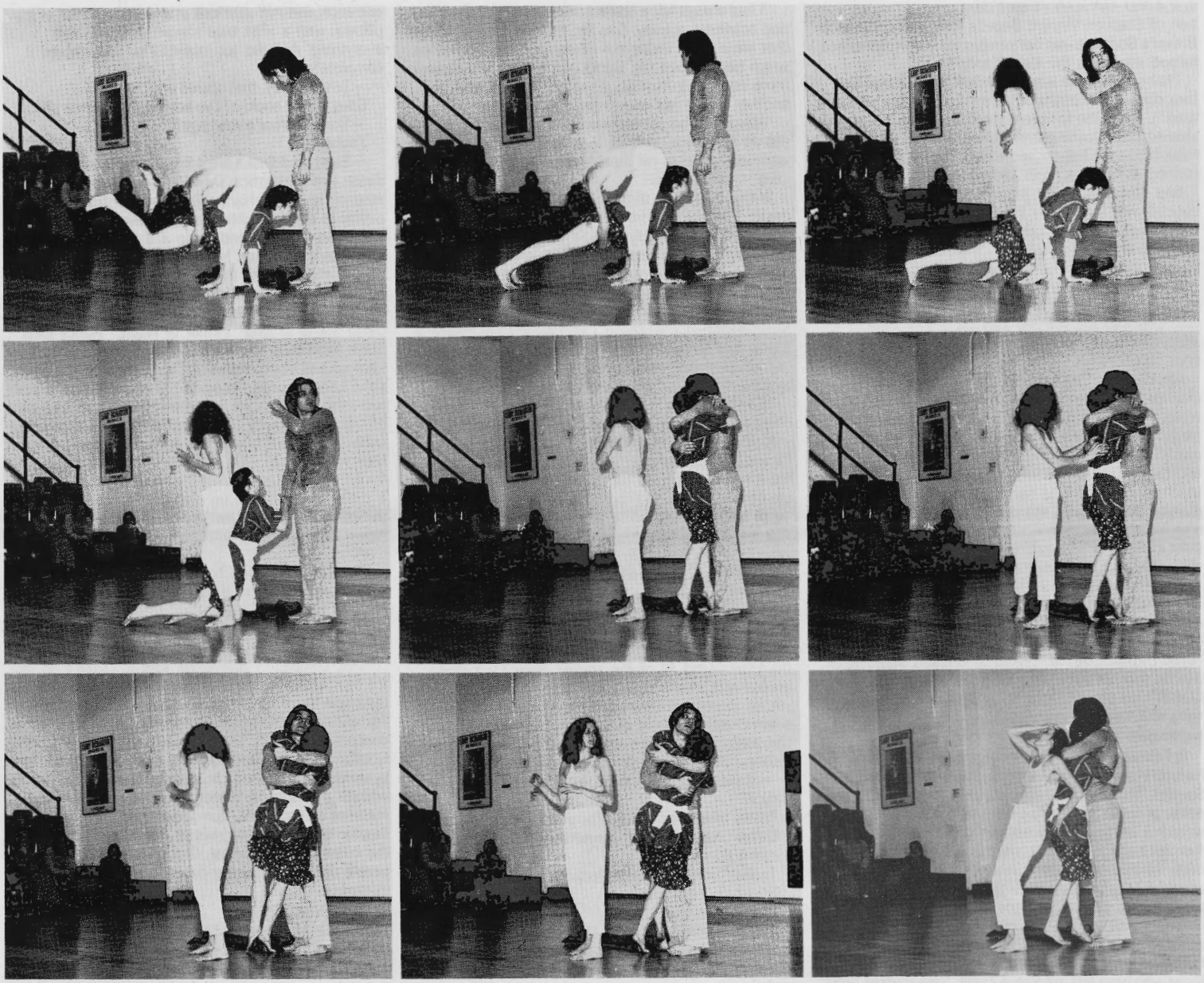
David's own choreography did not start up again until early 1972, when he made a large group piece entitled "The Matter." Contained in that evening-long work was a solo for Valda, which she later performed separately, as part of Waring's "Dancing Ladies" solos program at Westbeth the same spring. Called "One Part of the Matter," the solo was composed by David for Valda while she was on tour with Cunningham and he was home in New York: Cutting out forty photos of men and women in various athletic poses (they were from a collection by photographer Eadweard Muybridge), David made a "score" of the dance and mailed it to Valda, leaving the transitions up to her (at least until she returned home and they had their first rehearsal together).

David's solo concert at the Dance Gallery was a kind of retrospective, improvising with various material that he has worked on over the past several years. It was structured into three half-hour segments (a woman with a stop-watch would, in fact, yell "Twenty-nine" each time there was one minute to go, letting David know it was time to wrap it up). The first segment focused on repetition in performance/life: miniscule variations and tempo increases only served to underscore the growing frustration of participating in or observing the growing frustration of performance-without-climax (and this was further accentuated by David's playing out, through assorted moans and body contortions, the idea of unsatisfied sexual frustration—getting closer and closer to it, but never being able to come—at the same time). The last third of the program was structured around a stream-of-consciousness rhyming game; through words and movement, David attempted (as he often does in his Grand Union contributions) to incorporate into his performance audience feedback to that performance and verbal commentary (his own) on it.

Born a double Pisces on the South Side of Chicago, Barbara Lloyd began ballet classes in New Jersey (studying with Audree Estey, with whom Doug Dunn later studied, too) at the age of 12. After high school she spent the summer at Jacob's Pillow, studying with Ted Shawn, Myra Kinch, Margaret Craske, Carola Goya and Matteo—and saw Merce Cunningham (whose company she was later to join) perform for the first time ("it looked pretty weird"). College was at Mount Holyoke, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where she had an interdepartmental major in American culture ("I've always had this Pisces thing about finding connections—you know, the trends of Western history as exemplified in art and the social sciences—that whole image").

Barbara's first choreography was to the "Melora" sec-

(over)



Above series: Barbara Lloyd (in skirt), Trisha Brown (in sweatpants) and David Gordon in some of the improvised movement progressions and histrionics for which Grand Union is known. (Photos: Cosmos)

tion of Stephen Vincent Benet's long poem, "John Brown's Body"; it was her senior thesis at Holyoke and helped win her a Phi Beta Kappa key.

That summer she went to Connecticut College and took class with Cunningham ("my first contact with **real** work"), and in the fall she went to New York, where she studied with Cunningham, James Waring, Aileen Pasloff, Daniel Nagrin and Helen Tamiris (and performed with Pasloff and Tamiris).

She joined the Cunningham company in 1963 and danced with them until 1968—just after she had collaborated with musician Gordon Mumma on her first dance creation since college ("it was based on an FM transmitter and receiver. I was blindfolded and held the transmitter and Gordon held the receiver and I moved toward him directed by the sounds."). While working with Cunningham, she had also danced in some of the Judson concerts and had danced with Yvonne Rainer since 1966.

After leaving Cunningham, Barbara began to choreograph extensively, both in New York and at residencies in various colleges around the country. The pieces incorporated film and multi-media, modern music and jazz, natural movement (such as spinning and falling), structured improvisation, and a method of teaching movement to someone else "by just explaining the concept, not demonstrating." One dance idea, which Barbara refers to as "the figure" and which is an attempt to portray the symbolism of the mandala in dance, was tried several times (on a beach in the sand, with candles at night, etc.) but has never been fully successful ("I still want to do it some day. I see it as sort of a dance meditation."). Many of her dances had peculiar titles, like "Sapsuckersummer Dance," The "Blind Bird Box Dance" (again blindfolded, standing on a white milk crate) or "To the Golden Gate Bridge, from COAST" (as she explains: "COAST was to be this epic work which went from coast to coast and took three to six months to perform. It was total fantasy").

In February, 1972, Barbara organized a group called Natural History of the American Dancer: Lesser-Known Species, Volume IV, Chapters 12-24 ("now that has a sense of continuity all it's own!"), calling together "nine women I knew—not necessarily dancers—but members of a community, already associated with each other so that information received through the work could be supported at other times in other ways." The group began dealing with the members' place in "a masculine art world." The performance group is now down to six (Carmen Beuchat, Mary Overlie, Cynthia Hedstrom, Rachel Lew, Suzanne Harris and Barbara; those who have left are Batya Zamir, Sara Rudner, Judy Padow and Ann Danoff), and Barbara describes it as "exploring the creative role of a group—how does a group strengthen its creative energy, how can a group better support the creative needs of individuals? Specifically how solo can I become if I need to and still want to be a part of the whole?"

Other interests and influences which she lists range from Jungian psychology, meditation and the Sufi legends of Idries Shah—to jazz and rock music. ("I'm very interested in trying to work with live musicians, but it's very delicate, fraught with all sorts of personal and sexual implications.")

Doug Dunn was born in Palo Alto, California, grew up very interested in athletics. In college (Princeton) he became an art history major and had his first dance classes. After Princeton, he stopped dancing, taught in a prep school for three years (English and Spanish) and coached tennis, basketball and cross-country there.

"At the end of the three years, I started to dance again, with Joseph Albano in Hartford, Connecticut. I decided I really wanted to dance. I moved to New York and started studying with Merce, on the advice of Margaret Jenkins, whom I'd known in California.

"As soon as I started taking class there, I felt very different. I felt included in dance for the first time. Merce's dance encompasses a wider variety of body types.

"I had always felt a conflict between physical activity and academic activity. Dancing fulfilled a lot of things that were loose inside me—freed me from literature, which had trapped me. Books and history had become more and more frustrating, and Merce showed me another way. I felt everything pull together.

"Merce and his set-up provided a situation for me to put all my energy into at first. Most of the decisions were made for us, yet there were enough unknowns to keep it invigorating."

With the passage of time, Dunn has felt the need and desire to make some of his own artistic decisions. He has done duo concerts with Sara Rudner, Pat Catterson, David Gordon and Sheila Raj—and has been associated with Yvonne Rainer and Grand Union. In Paris recently, he also performed in a twenty-four-hour theater event directed by Robert Wilson: "It was a very free performance situation. I was given an audience, a space, and other people to work with. The rest was up to me. It helped me discover things about what I want to do with my self as raw material."

Likewise, in Grand Union "relationships constantly change, influencing our interactions and decisions. This work is very right for the people who are doing it. I don't think of Grand Union as an ideological cause, but for me it's the most important work that I'm doing at the moment. It fulfills the most needs."

III. PERFORMANCE

Some moments from Grand Union's series of seventeen concerts April 1 to May 31 at the Dance Gallery:

—Steve has managed somehow to be lying on his back atop an iron-bar-improvised ballet barre, about four feet off the ground. Doug is lying on three chairs, under the barre and Steve—and immediately under Trisha, who is lying on top of him. David is lying under the chairs (and all of the above). Nancy is tapping around with a cane, telling Barbara that she can't start yet. Barbara enters anyway, wearing a white gown and a construction helmet over a red bandana. "Music?" she asks. "What music do you want to hear?" Steve replies, "Something just perfect, Barbara."

—Steve (hanging from barre): "Can you do it, Nancy?"

Nancy (likewise): "This is the part I always forget."

David: "Nancy, I've got something for you. I'm bringing it over."

Trisha: "Sorry, this barre is closed."

Steve: "I'm slipping."

David: "Don't jump."

Trisha: "Hang on, Steve."

Steve: "If you put that foot down Doug" [Doug is across the room, walking] "you'll break your mother's back."

—Bob Dylan's **Nashville Skyline** album is playing. Steve is doing isometric muscle poses. Trisha and Nancy are on the barre in the middle of the room. Doug is dressed in army fatigues, looking for all the world like Donald Duck trying to do an arabesque. Nancy is chewing bubble gum. Barbara is dancing around in circles. The women are barefoot and Barbara has a ring on one of her toes. David and Doug are in tennis shoes and Steve is wearing klodhopper work boots.

—Steve: "We have a telephone call here for Trisha. Are you there, Trisha? This is from a boy named Danny, whom she met but once. In a skating rink. In 1966."

—Steve and Barbara and David begin wrestling. Trisha joins in, too, then Nancy. The whole thing becomes a moving, squirming sculpture and people collapse, fall off, climb back up again.

—Nancy: "Barbara, your selection of music just amazes me."

—Doug starts loping around the room; Steve follows him; Trisha follows Steve, with a chair, then collapses. Steve starts twirling Trisha; Doug starts twirling the chair. "Help," yells Nancy, who's on the barre.

—David: "Steve, do you find that the women in this company are a little hostile tonight? We're getting things thrown at us. Just because our clothes are nicer—"

Nancy (interrupting): "I made a **path** for your entrance, dammit! Just look at it—a whole path of gray pillows, with a little blue stream beside it and everything. And did you use it? No. You ignored it completely."

—Trisha: "Hey, that scared me."

Doug: "How could it? I've been doing it since 1965."

—Steve: "What's your sign?"

Trisha: "Go."

—Steve and Trisha are doing a combination of folk dance and acrobatics. David and Barbara are running around the room. Nancy grabs a man from the audience and goes into a pas de deux with him. David sits down at the grand piano and starts talking gibberish to Barbara. Nancy knocks down her partner, who starts pounding the floor, then gets up and takes her shoes off, chases her around the room and carries her to the piano. Barbara collapses on a chair. Bob Dylan starts singing "Father of Night." Nancy joins Steve and Trisha who are still doing acrobatics. Barbara gets up and starts spinning. David stays at the piano. John Lennon sings "Imagine." Steve and Trisha start mirroring each other's movements from opposite ends of the barre. Nancy carries out three chairs and gets under them. Trisha tells David it's time to go home. Nancy freaks out: "Oh, I hear it. It's time for the big finale. I've got to get out of this thing and run around in a circle and finish up on a high." The others throw things at her, tackle her, try to block her path, but Nancy achieves her grand Grand Union finale in spite of it all. . . .

Plus: David Gordon's blue toenails and hoop-skirted dress. Apple cider and grapefruit juice. Janis Joplin and Nilsson. Piaf and Aretha. Wolf howls and honky-tonk. Gymnastics and yoga. Calisthenics and kama sutra. Nancy Green doing a wild-haired, controlled out-of-control, completely marvelous solo to Dylan's "If Not for You." Doug Dunn almost stepping off the end of his tightrope barre onto Trisha Brown's proffered arm "extension" of the barre. An audience with lots of other dancers and artists; Sara Rudner watching Doug, Carol Goodden's St. Bernard watching everyone. Clumps and pyramids—improvised choreographic patterns. Bodies adjusting to spaces, objects, other bodies. Verbal material as comment, non-sequitur or counterpoint. A theater of the sensual/sinister, the funny/bittersweet, the commonplace/surreal. Grand Union: a group of people performing their groupness, peopleness, performingness. Hurrah.

IV. PERFORMING

"What does the Grand Union **do?"** asked Trisha Brown after three-and-a-half hours of interview preliminaries. David Gordon was there, too, and his wife Valda, plus a note-taking writer who was helping deplete the Gordons' Tanqueray gin supply. "Can we do a Louis Horst thing on that? Is there a Grand Union technique? What is it?"

Trisha proceeded to reply to her own rhetorical question. "O.K. I'll start it. Connection and reference are the two key words here. For example, Steve was in the hospital once and we went to see him. In the bed next to him was an old man who suddenly said, 'Oh, god, I'm slipping.' Since then, that phrase pops up all the time in Grand Union concerts. The first time it happened, Steve said it, and David and I both thought immediately, 'He can't remember that—he was only half-conscious in the hospital.' In fact, as I recall it, he even got the phrase **wrong.** But the reference was there nonetheless, and it stuck."

"You might call things like that collective unconscious references," said David. "Grand Union performances are full of them. It's like everyone adding his breath to one big balloon. Each new reference or response is another breath. And sometimes the response changes the shape of the balloon completely. Our whole thing is based on the ability of each of the people in the Union to—"

"—puff," supplied Trisha.

"Exactly."

Many observers have written interestingly and well

(over)

Above: Theatrical gymnastics are part and parcel of Grand Union offerings, especially when Steve Paxton (up on barre) and Trisha Brown (next to Steve) are involved. Wearing a blindfold and sunglasses (actually one of the less outlandish costume combinations adopted during the series) is Barbara Lloyd. (Photo: Cosmos)

At left: Running, spinning and sweating to the tune of an upbeat selection from the "Nilsson Schmilsson" album during the Grand Union grand finale evening at the Dance Gallery May 1 are the six choreographer/performers who participated in the series (from left): Barbara Lloyd, Nancy Green, David Gordon, Steve Paxton, Doug Dunn and Trisha Brown. (Photo: Narrye Caldwell)

GRAND UNION (Cont'd)

about this Grand Union balloon, describing it in terms of its movement ("I notice Grand Union's approach is very organic. The dancers don't strive for contrasts or surprises. . . They don't make phrases either, or long patterns of movement, at least not very often. They seem to like chains of short elements, natural ones, like walking, running, skipping in different ways. What they actually do is less interesting than the puddles and peaks that they make in space."—Deborah Jowitt, Village Voice dance critic), its artistic credo ("Always art but close to life; as much life in the art as possible; more life than anything around that is art. . .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, sculptor) or its theatrical significance ("During the past year, only one crucial performance-event, in which all previous theatrical assumptions are transcended and totally new rules and modes of procedure are postulated and acted upon. As a result all hitherto 'enjoyed' performances seem at least temporarily superfluous and beside the point."—Richard Foreman, director). But the best study of the group is still its own performances. And those presently adding their breath to the balloon have a good deal to say about the group's intentions (and its successes and failures) as well.

Steve Paxton has described the connections mentioned by David and Trisha as "organic variations—like a click, transporting you back to an earlier performance. You suspect that that circumstance is not random. You observe your own behavior and the other person's behavior in terms of cycles, behavior patterns."

He then went on to give an example: "Once I was talking to the audience about something and Trisha came up and held my hand and suddenly we were involved in a moment that we felt in performance six years ago—something that we'd both been keeping track of without realizing it."

Several members of the group feel the connections indicate an almost mystic tie that operates at times. "It's a mystery," Nancy Green puts it. "We're open enough to allow it to happen. The ego goes away and something comes in that connects us all." Trisha says, "Our sensory awareness has something to do with mystical skills. No one has ever been able to quite define it. A jump at one end of the room may be picked up by someone else at the other end of the room who wasn't even looking. So that it appears almost choreographed."

Doug Dunn points out how the members' ability to be aware of other things in the room has increased with the passage of time. Trisha defines the cumulative effect of such seen and exchanged material as "copying—putting parentheses around the original person's statement—underlining it and making it just that much fatter." David adds: "Hopefully everyone has an eye out for the total picture and is aware of other pictures going on while he's making one of his own. Trisha and I may feel our thing is thinning out, so we'll try to head in the direction of something else and try to join it."

(Yet there is a disparateness at times, too. "We build full throttle, not always connecting to the original material," Trisha says. Yet as David adds, "Even then, the quality of something that seems disparate can be established by the clarity of another person's vision. So there is coagulation after all.")

Steve has said that improvisation techniques have led Grand Union to develop a kind of "group mind." Trisha states, "We're a mini-culture, with lots of shared information. We're all 1960s people." She goes on to clarify, however, that the relationships delineated on stage are not necessarily the ones the members have in real life: "We have this look of great chumminess. It's a very good working relationship." Yet, as Doug points out, "If I chose to become very close to someone in the group, I think it would affect my performance. Dance groups are social organizations. But in Grand Union, social interactions are potential material—along with fantasy and real autobiography. What we have to do is objectify ourselves—portray ourselves for other people."

Barbara Lloyd sees this as part of why audiences find the company compelling: "Some people learn a lot about behavior by seeing Grand Union more than once. They empathize with our dilemma, identify with our choices. We become both personal and archetypal figures to them."

The improvisational method is, of course, central to all Grand Union work, though, as Steve says, improvising was more "a decision we arrived at" than the members' original plan (which was to make collaborative choreographies). In his Drama Review article, Steve examines several aspects of this improvisational method: "A Grand Union performance is not a two-hour predetermined flow, but an instant-to-instant, personal additive experience. . . It's not an aesthetic venture, unless you like aesthetics raw. . . We're living each moment for its own unique quality. Improvisation is not historical (not even a second ago)." Barbara compares the method to the Fibinacci series in mathematics, in which the sum of each two-number combination is then added to the larger number (1 plus 1 is 2; 2 plus 1 is 3; 3 plus 2 is 5; 5 plus 3 is 8; etc.): "The amount of space between the numbers is ever increasing. Improvisation blossoms in the same way. You can go further the more you do. Once you understand where **one** is, you can go anywhere easily." (Somewhat related to this is Barbara's theory that "everyone can dance. . .those of us who are highly trained simply have different problems from those who are untrained.")

Improvising with Grand Union has led Trisha away from improvisation in her own choreography outside the company ("I feel I don't need it there anymore), but it has had exactly the opposite effect on David: "The group has begun to reinstill in me confidence in my own creative process—has given me a faith in my own persona, so that I now feel able to improvise on my own."

Nancy, Barbara and Doug have all pointed out the difficulty they had early in the association with using verbal material. ("I have had a hard time talking in these performances," Barbara said, "but by the end of the series, I had reached a kind of 'sublime stutter' which defined exactly my relationship to language in performance.")

Leadership is a rotating thing, as Steve has written: "Following or allowing oneself to lead is each member's continual responsibility." Mood changes are also abrupt ("Suddenly the aesthetic of an evening will simply change. This is not predetermined in any way and has to do with a deeper source than any verbal remark" —Steve), and the whole experience is extremely elusive ("Grand Union work does not exist except at the moment. I know that's true of most dance in a way, but improvisation is even more fragile and more ephemeral than most dance."—Doug).

Because of all these things (and because, as Barbara says, in improvisation "one must let the ego wall down to let the energy flow out into possibility"), the method can at times be somewhat dangerous. As Doug puts it: "All the parts of our existence are a part of the performance. Everything we are comes out in that focus." He points out that such a risk was not necessary in his work with the Cunningham company ("With Merce, I was safe in a way. It was not my work. He was taking the risks, he was ultimately responsible for the material."), but that now the responsibility is his alone (and that of the other members of Grand Union)—"And, making decisions in front of people is the greatest risk I know."

Barbara also worries about the psychic dangers confronting the company: "The intensity of our performances is extremely draining. And then you start to want to improvise all the time, in real life as well. People begin to play with each other's heads." Thus, although Steve has written "Overt mind-fucking is to be avoided. . . The changes of material should be aimed at furthering communication, not hampering it," the fact remains that, as David says, "A friend of mine says we are getting further and further into primal therapy —and wonders how it is affecting our home lives."

Grand Union activities also look physically dangerous at times, though, as David puts it, "There are ways of doing dangerous things or dangerous-looking things without actually being unsafe." Steve points out in the magazine article: "In work of this kind, the eyes learn to judge more acutely, the skin becomes hypersensitive to qualities of touch, particularly the arms. . . Understanding where another's focus is becomes easy since it is instinctive. . . Relationships become possible at high speeds through opening up the senses and training the body in strength and elasticity that would be arduous if slowed. It becomes evident that dancers have been only touching the surface."

All of this has become easier for the members with the passage of time. Doug explains, "We used to talk a lot after each performance—why things did or didn't work. We now feel less of a need for that—we're no longer so intent on seeking to define. I feel much more confidence. We are dealing with something we know we can do. I feel a consistency and a solidarity that's new to our work."

In relation to that confidence, members' attitudes towards the audience have changed somewhat. Barbara says, "The pressure of carrying the audience with me has lifted somewhat now. In the Dance Gallery performances I was able to understand the integrity of a piece of material without it having to be valid for someone in the audience. For me, that was a strong place to get to." Trisha adds: "The Grand Union is offering live art. The concept is the performance—instant-by-instant decisions based on sensibilities trained by years of formal explorations. It was clear to all of us in those composition courses back at Connecticut College that we were not making modern dance in the way that we were being taught. Doris Humphrey used to say that the center of the stage was the hot spot and that the only strong movements were on a diagonal. We've been fighting that kind of thinking ever since. Hot is where the action is."

Trisha goes on, "We also realize the possibility of failure at times. Failure is inherent to our method. The audience realizes this. That's why they usually bring a picnic lunch."

Steve pointed out the value of critical and audience response to the performing, however: "I'm a performer doing a job, like anyone else. And it's good to know people can respond to that—can find out what I'm actually doing. A critic's job is to watch new work and make the bridges into that work—to find a vocabulary, to verbalize it. After a while, anything gets talked about. We as performers are at the mercy of that time lag, while the audience is arriving at verbal concepts, catagorizing the work. But too much criticism seems to deny that the experiences of a performer relate to general experience. With Cunningham in England, I found some writers who didn't do that, but provided a coherent image of what was going down. I want that kind of rebound, I want information about what we're doing. A critic reaches many more people than we do. From that point of view, it's important to have a critic, a person who has a trained eye, who can probably see aspects of the form that we can't connect up with, who can provide an accurate new vocabulary useful in quickening response."

Dares and possibilities. An explosion of connections—for anyone to make. Participatory anarchy, democratic order. You won't go home alone.

"Again and again I surprise myself with my actions so much that I forget them: a performance-amnesia, like a dream-image that recalls itself only when some outside force re-enforces it. I remember the Grand Union experience best when, again, we are making it."—Barbara Lloyd. □