

# The Grand Union, Critics and Friends

*The Grand Union is a collective dance company composed of dancer/choreographers who pursue complete improvisation when they perform together. Each performance is the result of on-the-spot decisions based on their own familiarity with each other and the experience of having performed together since, in most cases, the late Sixties.*

*On an October afternoon in 1974, Robb Baker, Carolyn Brown, Kathy Duncan, John Howell, James Klosty, Deborah Jowitt, Andy Mann, Robert Pierce, Sara Rudner, Valda Setterfield and Marcia Siegel met with Grand Union members Trisha Brown, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon and Nancy Lewis (Steve Paxton was absent) to talk about the Grand Union and about the ways critics respond to them. Here, culled by Doug Dunn, and further edited for space considerations by Robert Pierce, is some of what was said.*

**B. Dilley:** I'm having weird reactions to being here. And you people, I don't even know your names. I don't even think you are my critics.

**D. Gordon:** You admit there are such things as critics?

**B. Dilley:** Yes.

**D. Gordon:** And there is such a thing as Grand Union?

**B. Dilley:** Yes.

**D. Gordon:** And we can talk

together about the work, partly to clarify what it is for ourselves and for the critics, and partly to find out what it is people are seeing?

**B. Dilley:** Yes. And partly to get material for an article that we can't write ourselves because we don't have a six-headed pen.

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**D. Jowitt:** Are you interested in the difference between what you're doing feels like to you and what it looks like to somebody else?

**D. Gordon:** That's partly it. There doesn't seem yet to be a difference between the language that describes or deals with conventional choreography and the language that deals with information that is being transmitted in a very different way. If we were doing equivalent work in painting or sculpture we would be dealt with as revolutionaries. Instead we are dealt with as light entertainment.

**B. Dilley:** Do you think we're revolutionary?

**T. Brown:** No. When we started out with unpremeditated improvisation, it was an unheard of risk, to me, to go out and present art without knowing what you're going to do in advance. Now we've had four years of experience together and we have it down pat. I know what's happening in Grand Union and I don't have that worry any more. It feels to me like we've gotten codified.

**D. Jowitt:** Don't you think it's that

after a while people develop a personal style?

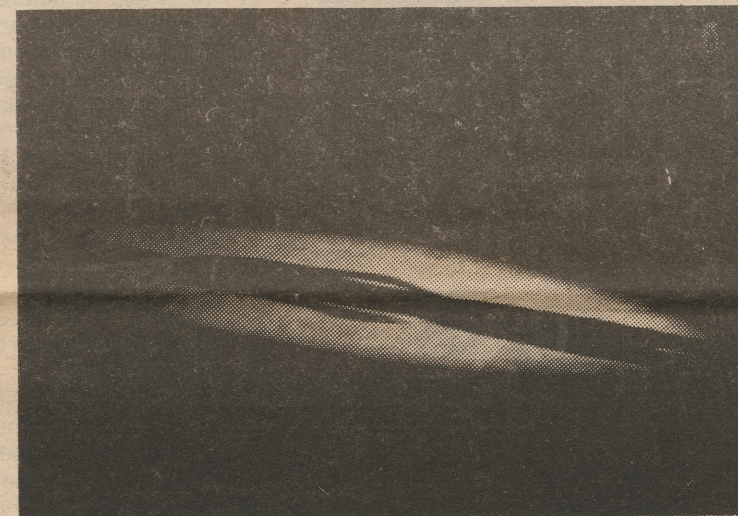
**D. Gordon:** I'm often enough amazed at what I find Trisha about to do. I think what's become codified is the reaction to the material. David's funny: that's an easily taggable activity that has very little to do with what's actually going on. I remember a performance in which I was angry

us. We're conditioned to look at performance in a certain way. We don't want to see people exposed. We don't want to see what they're really communicating, we want to see what they think they want to communicate.

**T. Brown:** But that's so much a part of what Grand Union does. The tiredness shows, and the confusion.



Nancy Lewis being crucified



Valda's shadow



Nancy Lewis lying on Doug Dunn

and hostile and uncomfortable, and the first person to walk over to me afterwards said, "You were hilarious." It was not true, it was what he thought.

**J. Howell:** I think that's the kind of thing that can happen when someone sees you only once.

**D. Gordon:** And the other possibility is that they come a lot of times, decide what it is, and box it.

**M. Siegel:** I don't think that comes so much from your establishing a persona and the audience pigeonholing you, as it comes from our not really wanting to see what we see. We don't want to see somebody angry on stage, we want to see a performer performing for

**R. Baker:** I think Grand Union is about performing. I agree that the preconception of the audience is for entertainment, but what interests me is seeing the process, the attempts at doing whatever you do.

**M. Siegel:** It's not just entertainment they want, it's acceptable behavior.

**T. Brown:** Art's often not entertainment.

**N. Lewis:** Whatever is happening we act on it and it becomes theater because there's an audience there.

**D. Gordon:** We are aware of the unacceptable behavior, know it as unacceptable when it occurs, and have established that unacceptable

behavior is acceptable in the performance. Trisha does things in performance I find absolutely unacceptable. I accept them. I have to accept them. They're there.

**D. Jowitt:** Entertainment is a word that doesn't mean anything really. It seems more useful to me to talk in terms of what people will accept, what they blind themselves to so they don't have to accept it, as on the established stage, where dancers are doing incredible things, and the audience doesn't see those things. Instead they see beautiful legs going up in the air and all that. Grand Union is doing something on two levels; you're doing the show, which you're hoping will work, in whatever sense you mean by that, and you're also being or not being yourselves at any given moment. It's very heavy because you have a verbal expertise that's the equivalent of some 900 candle-power arabesque.

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**R. Baker:** I think that if we writers go about putting this work into an organized framework, that we are immediately on the wrong track, because it is not in the nature of Grand Union performing to have an organized framework. What we need to convey is a sense of what's going on, which isn't always organized.

**D. Jowitt:** But what you could see clearly in the bit of performance video tape we just saw was the infectiousness of certain movement: Barbara's initial flinging of the scarf, which got passed on, the introduction of running, then the running and flinging getting all mixed up together until something new happened. This form of movement communication takes place frequently.

**D. Gordon:** In some instances we are choosing to do something that will be the complement or the opposite of a kind of movement that is going on, and also making decisions about the use of the space in the way that a choreographer makes decisions, except that here they are instant decisions. We are manipulating ourselves, coming up with a group idea of what form the movement will take, what structure we may impose on it.

**D. Dunn:** What struck me, seeing the entire tape, was the wide range of material: everyone working together, to everyone working separately; doing something, to doing what you might call nothing; dancing in silence, to music, against music; making our own music; talking to each other, and acting out roles; sometimes going back and back until we're talking about talking about talking about the performance, so that finally we're offering up a performance within a non-performance image, or vice versa.

**D. Jowitt:** It's true that each evening has changing textures of its own: holds, long sections when there's a lot of looking, and waiting, and fiddling, false starts, very purposeful things like changes of energy, moments when everybody galvanizes to do something together, playful times.

**M. Siegel:** Each performance is a different thing. That's what makes the work as revolutionary as it is. ●

Photos by Robb Baker

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