

Dance/Marcia B. Siegel

ERASURES AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

“... When Humphrey left the scene in 1958, modern dance was beginning a long crisis of confidence, a period of disaffection ...”

The maddening thing about dance is that it never assumes a definitive, permanent form. Not only does this create problems of taste and interpretation, it places in doubt all subsequent judgments, memories, evaluations. A dance is only as good as the performance we're looking at. There's no such thing as a choreography or a style whose bare facts can be verified, let alone its value.

I had hoped the Dance Notation Bureau's evening devoted to **Doris Humphrey** would offer enough well-performed examples of her work to clear up the misconceptions that have increasingly obscured her role in American choreography. Humphrey was one of our greatest creative artists. The public, I suspect, will still need convincing.

Humphrey had the misfortune to be the first of the major moderns to die, and when she left the scene in 1958 modern dance was beginning a long crisis of confidence, a period of disaffection spurred by the questions of Merce Cunningham and the whole anti-romantic avant-garde. Only now is the modern-dance point of view being appreciated again. But we have changed in the period that intervened, and so has the look of dancers, who so quickly reflect our changing aesthetics.

The program, at the Roundabout Theater, was designed to show not only Humphrey's work but the way we've used her legacy. Daniel Lewis's *Beethoven Duet* was ample demonstration of what three generations' remove has done to a rational, rigorous, and carefully structured approach to dancing. The duet, based on themes by Humphrey disciple José Limón, was danced by two ballet dancers, William Carter and Naomi Sorkin. They were musical, they moved with spacious dignity and a pleasant, serious performing attitude. But what a pitiful semblance of Humphrey this dance is, with its pretty sways and sweepings, gentle meetings, decorative gestures, and almost total lack of thematic organization.

We got a glimpse of something closer to the Humphrey spirit in Carla Maxwell's performance of *Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931) and in a demonstration



Tribute: *Day on Earth*, danced by Jim and Jessica May in the Dance Notation Bureau's evening devoted to Doris Humphrey.

of classroom exercises arranged by Nona Schurman for Deborah Carr, Mary Gambardella, Sam Harris, Gary Masters, and Fred Mathews. This was dancing of risk and dynamism, the exhilaration that comes from struggling with one's environment, not the compliant softness of giving in to it.

One reason Humphrey's work is known at all today is that she believed in notation as an effective way of documenting a dance. Several of her works were notated before she died, and Labanotation scores were used in the program's reconstructions of *Day on Earth* (1947) by Lewis's Dance Repertory Company and *Passacaglia* (1938) by the Limón Company. But I wonder how good a method of preservation this is when I see steps, rhythms, and, above all, style that differ from one performance to the next.

I suspect that the woman in *Day on Earth* is supposed to be a strong, independent partner to the man, with clear complementary arm gestures, abstractions of the work they both do. Yet Hannah Kahn's arms were rounded and vague, "womanly" in some general way but not precisely delineated. Jim May's upper body was graphic but lacked the strength and expansiveness that underlay the masculine style of Limón, who created the role. Probably the accuracy of the notation is less at fault than the difficulty directors and reconstructors

have in defining, teaching, and maintaining stylistic concepts, in keeping contemporary dancers from kneading and stretching and softening the past to make it fit them.

Ernestine Stodelle's revival of *Water Study* (1928) seemed closer to the Humphrey style, but Stodelle herself is closer to Humphrey, having danced in the early Humphrey-Weidman Company. She also directed a curiosity called *The Pleasures of Counterpoint*. Though the program led one to believe this last was substantially the dance Humphrey choreographed in 1932, it actually was a set of Stodelle's variations on themes from the original dance. Its shape was further obfuscated by disfiguring costumes, painstakingly re-created from designs by Pauline Lawrence.

The proceeds of the evening will go to the Dance Notation Bureau, to notate *Counterpoint* and the *Beethoven Duet* and maybe some other contemporary renditions of Humphrey. I think it would be kidding ourselves to imagine we can recover any more Humphrey this way.

Dance gets distorted and dissipated in two main ways. One is by deliberate upset, strong counteraction, like the therapeutic revolution of the fifties and sixties against the drained, over-decorative formalism of modern dance. The other is more insidious—a degeneration of the creative impulse through tiny lapses of detail, inadvertent change, elaborations, and reworkings of what were once original ideas.

At the other end of the continuum begun by Doris Humphrey and the moderns, **David Gordon** is building back up again on the structures stripped bare by Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, and the minimalists. In the performance of Gordon's *Pick-Up Company* at American Theater Lab, I was amazed at how complex and stylized his work looked, and—already—how derivative.

I think Gordon is basically a theater person—which didn't necessarily exclude him from the experimental pursuits of the Judson Dance Theater a decade and a half ago. He doesn't have a dancer's body, or even an athlete's,

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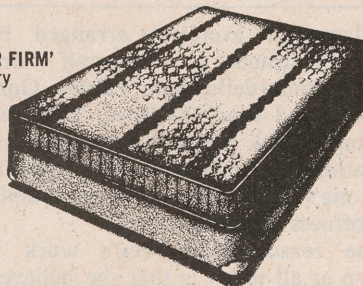
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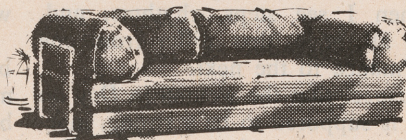
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and I find the way he moves the least arresting thing about him. When performing he's always impersonating—often a version of himself—but he's never *only* himself. He stands eyeball-to-eyeball with the audience in *Mixed Solo*, looks at us, frankly, sincerely, confidentially—that is, he *acts* frank, sincere, confidential. But he makes me uncomfortable because he pretends not to be pretending. Later, the people who've been standing in the background watching and wisely remarking on his dance do the same dance, disarming grins and all. *Mixed Solo*, choreographed last spring, is all about the wiles of the performer, the audience's gullible efforts to grasp the profundity we think is there, the ease with which naturalness can be converted into rehearsed material. The dance is circular, airtight, a comment on commenting.

Chair (1974) is a send-up of all the techniques the post-modern dancers used to liberate themselves from the ragged coattails of Graham and Humphrey. Gordon and Valda Setterfield scramble through a long series of moves on two folding chairs. The moves—purposeless but purposefully performed—were supposedly derived from an outlandishly complicated chance procedure. Loaded but irrelevant music ("The Stars and Stripes Forever") plays and does not play. It all seems so much more like a regression to childhood now than it did four years ago.

I think to Gordon words make more sense than movement for conveying ideas. His new piece, *What Happened*, is a sort of choral reading for seven women. In flat, isolated beats, speaking sometimes together, sometimes in a jumble of individual timing, they recite selected words and short phrases, each with an accompanying movement or gesture. It's like a kind of sign language in which the gestures sometimes illustrate or pun the words. Others have used this idea before—Remy Charlip, Trisha Brown, and Kathy Duncan come to mind—but Gordon manipulates the word sequences brainily so that the limited material never quite organizes itself into complete grammatical sentences or whole stories, yet a dense aural-visual texture is created. At particular points the nonsense evolves into Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech.

Gordon's movement seems deliberately neutral, serving as a sort of visualization of the sound effects, and both elements are meticulously shaped and controlled to develop patterns of unison, echoing, counterpoint, and carefully arranged floor patterns. It's not exactly a dance, but it kept reminding me of Doris Humphrey.