

# Dancing for the Church That Gave Them a Leg Up

By Janice Berman

**W**HAT CHOREOGRAPHER David Gordon remembers about Judson Memorial Church was that there was a gymnasium "downstairs, under the stage," where the dancers used to rehearse. "They've turned it into a place to store books," Gordon said the other day, his voice slightly incredulous. "They have a book fair once a year."

Things do change, and after all, it has been 28 years since the Judson Memorial Church first provided a forum for dancers. But what has endured is the kind of dance that was presented and nurtured there — post-modern dance.

The word post-modern encompasses a lot. The initial idea at Judson seemed to be rebellion at the idea that dance should rise as an expression of music or literature. It was rebellion against conventional technique, form, musicality, theatricality. What we see today in such venues as Dance Theater Workshop, P.S. 122, the Kitchen, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Joyce Theater — in fact, everywhere dance is being performed — reflects the changes those artists began. Then as now, the rebellion takes many forms.

Among the artists of that time were Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Carolyn Brown, Steve Paxton and the two artists performing tomorrow, Friday and Saturday at the church on Washington Square as part of Judson's Centennial Celebration.

Lucinda Childs will perform two solos, "Pastime" (1963) and "Carnation" (1964), and four members of her troupe will dance her 1976 "Radial Courses." The David Gordon / Pick Up Company will present the two sections of Gordon's enormous "United States" never performed in New York City: "Weather" and "Birds in Trees and the Birthday of Congress."

Judson Memorial Church, at 55 Washington Square South, is affiliated with the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ. It was founded in 1890 by Edward Judson and designed by Stanford White. Its role in the arts community has extended far beyond the world of dance. When the Rev. Howard Moody arrived at the church 34 years ago, he began forging links between the church and the community's artists.



Thomas Victor

**Lucinda Childs, left, was a student of Merce Cunningham in 1962 when she danced at the Judson. She'll dance in the church's centennial program this weekend.**

They needed gallery space; the Judson Gallery, established in the mid-'50s, showed the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and Alan Kaprow. The artists' presence led to the Happenings that began in 1957. And there was a literary quarterly, "Exodus," established in 1959 and a Poets' Theater in 1961, the year Al Carmine arrived as a junior minister. The following year marked the beginning of the Judson Dance Theater, which was begun when a group of dancers who had studied composition with Robert Dunn at Merce Cunningham's studio asked if they could perform there.

The dancers auditioned before the church's board, Moody recalled. "Everybody was interested in it. It was different from ordinary dance, so we gave it the go-ahead." Without reservation, he added. "We didn't censor anything then and wouldn't now. It's sort of a penance for all the years the Church acted as a censor for the arts, telling painters what they couldn't paint and writers what they couldn't write."

Judson provided modern dancers with a much-needed outlet. Those were the days when modern dancers got a slot in the regular modern dance concerts at the 92nd Street YMHA, or they hired a hall on their own, an expense few could afford.

What Lucinda Childs remembers from her first concert at Judson in 1962 is feeling "very lucky to have space available. It was very important to me." She was a student at Cunningham's studio, taking a course that applied the thinking of composer John Cage about chance operations to choreography. What the training did was place the choreographer "outside the dance vocabulary, outside the realm of personal inventiveness." Childs was 22.

The audience for the most part, Childs recalled, was "not a dance audience. It was mainly artists from other disciplines:

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poets, playwrights, artists and musicians. There was an effort made to bring the art form of dance into existence on a level with other art forms of the time." And at times, artists from other disciplines participated in the dancemaking that was going on.

Childs' involvement drew to an end after a "Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering," a collaboration with Bell Labs in 1966. "It had turned into the feeling of an exercise. I wanted to get back into the studio, to deal with movement quality again." She didn't perform again until 1973.

"It was an ideal opportunity for someone green from college, a showcase, a chance to grow and develop," she said. "Attention was paid to it. It was as if it was something that needed to happen." In fact, she said, the loft building on Broadway where she has a studio, a co-op put together in 1974, was another outgrowth of Judson, as are its other inhabitants: Douglas Dunn, who came aboard later in the '60s, Trisha Brown and David Gordon.

Gordon considered himself outside the Judson Dance Theater in many ways. He was a New Yorker, and was already heavily involved in experimental dance through studies and performances with Merce Cunningham and James Waring, respectively. He had already created a duet called "Mama Goes Where Papa Goes" for himself and Valda Setterfield, then as now his keenest influence / muse.

"Valda and I were married," Gordon said by phone from his co-op, "and Valda was very pregnant. During the first Judson performances of July, 1962, Valda was in the hospital, having Ain, who was born on July 4." Today, Ain Gordon is a performance artist.

"Ain has a new play of his running at P.S. 122 for four weekends, called '30 Stories,'" said his father, "and I think it's more important that people go to see this than that they sit and babble about what happened twenty-seven years ago." /■