

Modern dance was created in reaction to ballet, a very rigid, traditional form of dance. The basis of modern is authenticity, connection, not only others, but with Earth, time and other abstract ideas.

Mercier Philip “Merce” Cunningham (1919-2009) was one of the most influential modern dancers and choreographers. After being Martha Graham’s top soloist for 6 years he later formed his own company the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Many of his students include Paul Taylor, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and many more.

Cunningham’s choreographic creative process was unique and often went against the body’s natural rhythmic tendencies. He introduced the chance operations method, in which he would flip a coin or roll dice to determine the dancer, sequence of movements, and lighting for the show. This resulted in a Split Sides show, which was a two part production with lighting, costumes and everything else prepared. To choose the one that went first he would flip a coin behind the curtain with the audience waiting.

Cunningham also saw lighting, music and dancing independent from one another. This often resulted in an unnatural look and feel to his pieces which became his signature. As a result of the chance method and the independence of the components of the pieces, his technique a combination of Graham and ballet, had to be redefined. Most of his movements would generate from the spine, rather than the ground or a set of standards and rules.

Overall Merce Cunningham embodied the original beliefs of modern. Dance should be a reflection of what is in the heart and the communities around you. Life often feels like overwhelming possibilities and that is what the chance method personified, when life throws something unexpected at you, you have to be able to adapt and change, like his technique over the years.

Works Cited

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