

# Steve Paxton

the  
Kitchen  
center for video and music

KATHY DUNCAN

Steve Paxton & Dancers  
The Kitchen  
59 Wooster

That the body never lies is one of the most popular statements Martha Graham ever made. Steve Paxton, in a quiet, extraordinary performance last week, made me think about the converse: That, if there is such a thing as Truth, it must be right here in our bodies, and it takes countless forms. A great deal of dance is faking. Dancers look like they're leaning, but they're not really leaning; or falling, but they're not really falling. Of course, theatricality sets up another level on which we accept those lies as truth so that when a dancer *really* looks like he/she's leaning or falling, but isn't really, we consider it good dancing.

Paxton erases that level of ghost-truth by not making his performance a magic event, but just what he said on a cryptic postcard I received: "Contact Improvisation. You come. We'll show you what we do." The six men and women work in pairs, bearing each other's weight, lifting, hauling each other, falling on each other, throwing themselves at each other. They place themselves in physical danger and come out of it in surprising ways. (Sometimes they don't make it and take bone-cracking falls). They are disciplined, unemotional and intently absorbed in the work. You seldom see people so basically honest with themselves and so heroically trusting of one another. It taught me a lot about the body.

One of the most beautiful things is when a body deflects or slides naturally off another body. You can see it when it happens because there are certain laws—different for each body—about how this has to happen. Joints bend in a certain way, the speed changes according to a certain pattern. A natural momentum is started and often the dancers use it to go

somewhere. Sometimes they do a lot with the energy—a leg extension, a roll, etc. But I like it best when they waste it. They just let it stop. It's a refreshingly honest thing to do.

Another truth is the way the body moves in reaction to a split-second change of mind. This happens often in this work and sometimes it's spectacular. This is one of the dangers—a sudden change can easily throw one off balance. There are times when a dancer might place his/her head in the path of someone just as he/she starts a forward roll, for instance. The dancers always seem to find smooth ways to get out of almost any situation. They challenge each other, like when one person carries another and suddenly changes his direction. The way they can flow with those changes is a test of how fearless they are.

I loved watching the way the body's natural protective reflexes take over. When someone falls backward from riding someone's shoulders, the hands automatically reach down, ready to take the weight. As long as fear doesn't freeze you, there will always be a hand or a foot to keep the head from breaking open. Some of them know this well enough to take foolhardy

chances. One tall man catapults himself over another taking him along in a wild forward roll that heads straight into one of the pillars. A difference of about a foot could have meant a concussion (it seems to me). David Woodberry stands straight up on Paxton's shoulders, wavering slightly. He falls backward and an involuntary tremor of acrophobia seizes me. But he just lands on his feet like a cat. What could be more natural?

The work tempted me to make all kinds of generalities about the performers—about which ones were comfortable in their bodies, which ones were gentle, which ones aggressive. One could make these observations about people on the street, of course. But in this work the personalities seem enlarged. You're watching people in the height of concentration—people who are practiced enough to work for long periods without letting their attention flag. They are disciplined. They stick to the point and never lapse into irrelevant things. But each one has an individual way with the work. They made me feel that if I saw them a few more times I would know them inside-out.

Much as I hate to say it, there seemed to be a rather obvious sex role difference. The men generally seemed to initiate movement more than the women, though the women had no qualms about lifting and carrying much heavier men. The men also seemed to need naturally to dare more.

The dancers worked in pairs through both performances. This added a new dimension—to see what results when certain personalities are combined. How the two people who seem the least comfortable in their bodies work together—the kind of bluff-fighting they tend to do. And how two people who are gentle and passive work together—the quietness of their movement. If I could see them every day, there would be another dimension—what happens between the pairs as each of these people runs through the gamut of his/her moods and energy levels.

59 wooster street / new york city, 10012 / (212) 925 3615