

Lucinda Childs

One of the world's foremost choreographers, The Lucinda Childs Dance Company recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. Beginning her study with Helen Tamaris, Judith Dunn, Bessie Schoenberg, and Merce Cunningham, Ms. Childs went on to participate with the Judson Dance Theatre for 6 years, appearing in *Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, and *Vehicle*, among others. The Lucinda Childs Dance Company premiered at the Whitney Museum of Art. Ms. Childs collaborated with Philip Glass and Robert Wilson on *Einstein on the Beach*, appearing as a leading performer in it, and with Robert Wilson on *I was Sitting on My Patio this Guy Appeared I Thought I was Hallucinating*, as well as other pieces. Ms. Childs's dances include *Pastime*, *Carnation*, *Melody Excerpt*, *Cancellation Simple*, *Geranium*, *Available Light*, *Calyx*, *Concerto*, *One and One*, and *White Edge of Phrygia*. She has choreographed around the world: with Luc Bondy on *Salome* in Salzburg and London, performed in his premiere of *Reigen* in Brussels; the Scottish Opera's *Macbeth*; with Peter Stein on -De Nederlandse Opera's *Moses und Aron*; with John Adams and Frank Gehry on *Available Light*, and will perform her upcoming *Description (of a Description)* to be presented at The Kitchen this Spring. Ms. Childs was appointed an Officer dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1996, received a Guggenheim, and the 2001 "Bessie" for sustained achievement.

What are you currently at work on?

Presently I'm working with White Oak. I've known the group for a while and I'm delighted with their work. Last year we had twelve dancers last year in my company. Right now some are with White Oak, a few with David Gordon, some are teaching. I'm thinking our next project will be in 2004.

How have the current events impacted upon you?

At times it's difficult to communicate how you feel. It feels like there's not a lot we can do. All these things keep hitting us out of the blue. I've been very concerned about the dancers, the kinds of things they're going through. They're raring to go on. I try to be helpful in any way I can.

You had the opportunity of studying with Helen Tamaris. Does what she said still reverberate within you?

I felt I had a lot of nerve to audition for her. When I was chosen to work with her in a trio I was in a state of anxiety, agonizing over my technique. She wasn't interested in that. She told me: "I don't choose people because of their technique. It's not about high you can jump or how far you can turn out." It taught me a lesson. It also energized me to keep working on my technique.

The Judson Dance Theatre continues to hold our attention. How did your explorations working there spur your growth?

I was with them for a period of years, interested in commonplace objects, working with text, with no music. I was inspired by the minimalist movement. I became very interested in patterns of movement, applying myself to the idea: if you took it all away, what did it leave you? I did a lot of studies, solo work, of just walking, changing directions. One piece was just four boys with no

music in four circles. That was a big step for me but an important one. I built a collection about walking. I had studied ballet, and all my dancers were in ballet class; they had either come from Cunningham or Graham. But I wasn't interested in displaying technique, I was interested in exploration.

At one point you stopped actively performing to acquire a master's degree in education and began to teach. What led you to want to go in that direction?

It was the late 60's and there was no National Endowment, and we were all struggling like crazy. I felt a need to be self-supportive. I talked to a friend about it and decided to get into the school system, and teach children. I thought: "It'll be a short day, I'll be out by 3 o'clock." It turned out to be much more engaging. I went to City College and really loved it. I didn't really give up dancing. I just took on much more. Then when the NEA came along, I did a performance at The Whitney and was back into it.

Why perform a piece in silence?

There's really no such thing as silence. But without added sound, the audience's attention is on the dancers' patterns. And you can still hear them move. My dancers wore sneakers. And the patterns had a music of their own, a sensibility, in keeping time. Their accelerating together, their slowing down, came out in a musical way.

You collaborated with Philip Glass and Robert Wilson on one of the legendary theatre pieces of the 20th century, "Einstein on the Beach."

That experience really came out of Judson, out of the exploration in alternate space, carried out in silence. I had seen Wilson's *Queen Victoria* and was amazed by the transformation of the space, the re-defining

of the architectural space. It was an inspiration for me collaborating on *Einstein*. Dealing with more traditional elements in an entirely different way.

Where is the state of dance today?

The dancers since the 1960's, including those who were in Cunningham's or Joffrey's companies have grown enormously. The horizontal traffic is unbelievable. I just auditioned a girl from the Louisville Ballet and she's so versatile. I love working with dancers like these.

It's also still very difficult for the artist in this country.

The performing arts in this country have always been neglected. In the 60's there was no support to speak of, no way to prosper, it was demoralizing. And to be constantly searching for money is debilitating. Small companies like mine are not eligible to apply to the NEA for general support. It's painful not to have the support one would like. And when you compare the work done here with what's being done in Europe, you can see our handicaps. In Europe there's no question the dancer will be paid. We've almost returned to the period of the 60's today. There was a period during the 70's, which contributed to the "dance boom" of the 80's. But when people opposed to Federal support talk about that period, all they come up with is Mapplethorpe. That wasn't what that time was about. Groups still somehow manage to struggle on today but when they become successful, they're penalized for being successful. They hear: "What do you need us now for?" Though I was very pleased and encouraged to receive the "Bessie" Award recently.

What inspires you?

I've been jumping around in many differ-



Description (of a Description)

ent styles since the 60's. Working with painters, poets, with text, connecting with Wilson, in recent years I've done more opera. What keeps me going is feeling I have the option to move around. Unfortunately a lot of the work I do in Europe isn't seen here. I don't want to leave here and be cut off, but it's very encouraging to work there.

The focus required, the concentration seems enormous.

This kind of work requires a very deep focus from the dancer. My pieces are carefully rehearsed, repeatable and very precise. If you're doing a Cunningham piece, you have to look at what's there and translate it into what you can do, something you can live. This work is very beautiful to watch in performance. I was drawn to this way of working and I built something out of it for myself.

Do you feel a kinship to the pioneers of Modern Dance, like Denishawn and Isadora Duncan, do they inspire you?

I was very moved by the struggles they went through, and very impressed with Isadora Duncan. She didn't want to dance at a wedding or on someone's lawn; she wanted her work to be perceived as an art form, and to be performed in a theatre. She finally had to go to Russia to get the respect she deserved: I was very moved when I was growing up hearing about her life. She had this vision and perseverance, and that was an inspiration to me.