

THE KITCHEN

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Paxton: charismatic soloist with his own vision

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Steve Paxton improvised to Bach's "Goldberg Variations," as played by Glenn Gould, for four performances at The Kitchen, and it was more than a playful workout. Paxton has danced his way through some of the most significant aspects of modernism in the last 25 years, as an early member of Merce Cunningham's company, a collaborator in the Grand Union, and a founder of the highly tuned duet form that's spread throughout the United States called "contact improvisation." With his "Goldberg" tour de force, he loops directly into the tradition of charismatic soloists inaugurated at the turn of the century by Isadora Duncan.

Like Duncan, Paxton dances what the music inspires in him, making a spectacle of his own body, his inventiveness, his endurance, and concentration over the hour or so it takes to play the music. And like Duncan, he refuses to glamorize or sensationalize this achievement. But there are important differences.

Always a diffident performer, Paxton seems to be trying to detach himself entirely from his actions in "Goldberg." He wears his usual sweat pants and T-shirt and has chalk-white makeup smeared over his face. During the whole dance he maintains a blank expression, with only glints of aliveness breaking through to reflect the scintillation, joy, humor conveyed by the rest of his body.

His movement is totally unpredictable, working against the formal patterns of Bach but capturing the rhythmic thrust and often the logic of the musical line. He splinters his body into minute and obscure isolations. The arms, shoulders, back, legs seem to consist of more parts than we ever dreamed of, and they can all move independently or in sequence as he wills them to. One arm starts to reach crookedly out in front of him, the upper back curves after it, then somehow below his chest he starts to twist in a different direction, and before any of these actions is complete, he might jump softly straight up and land on the floor with one leg folded under him.

He seems to be an intelligent conduit for the music and nothing else. His energy

level is low and steady, but he can burst into ecstatic whipping, fractured turns, or melt into impossible twisted falls.

Not only does he deny the visibility-assisting devices of repetition and natural ebb and flow, he avoids using any spatial patterns we might recognize, such as gestures that suggest ordinary action. I never saw someone move continuously for such a long time without referring to anything except his own movement.

At intervals he rests, walking and keeping the rhythm going with little pulses in his head and hands.

Toward the end, the lighting gets more dramatic, and he seems to hear something outside the performing space and to be trying harder to balance or lift himself; but even this is only perceptible because his inner concentration intensifies around certain actions. The piece ends as unassumingly as it began, with a series of isolations to the return of Bach's original theme.

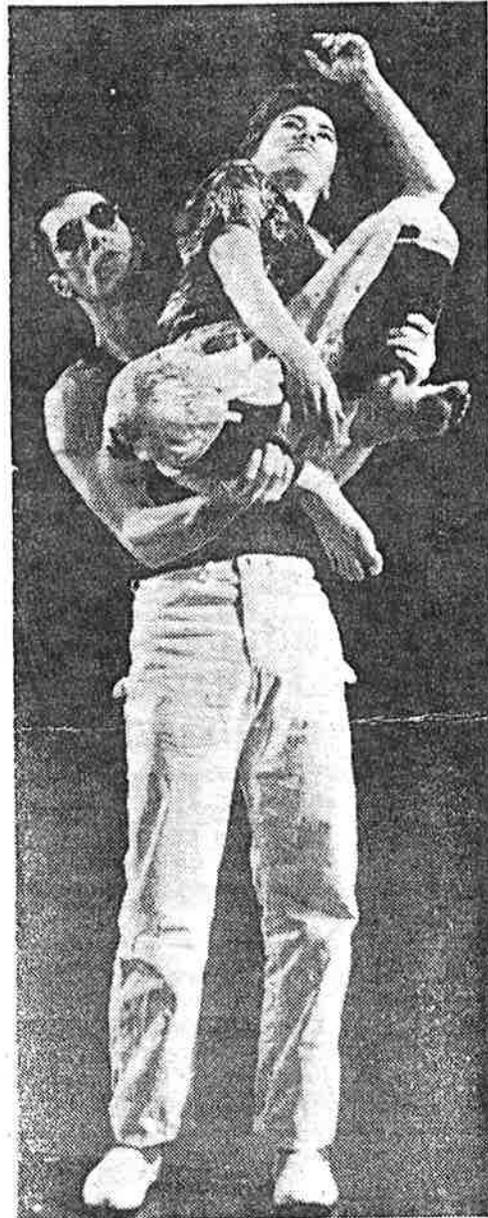
I felt I had been watching an extended, private meditation, a monk in a Noh play, a man being totally subjective and objective at the same time.

On the same program Paxton and Lisa Nelson did a long, sparse, perverse duet,

"PA RT," to a distracting pseudo-psychological narration by Robert Ashley. With a lot more stillness and less athleticism than a typical Contact piece, the dance had long solos - Nelson rolling and curling into a ball near the ground and Paxton warily reconnoitering, remote and straight - before they achieved some brief, eccentric mergers. After "Goldberg Variations" it seemed an anticlimax.

DANCE

In 'Goldberg' Steve Paxton seems to be an intelligent conduit for the music and nothing else.



Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson in 'PA RT'

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