

Video-maker uses dance as a metaphor for the times

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

In the early 1970s, Charles Atlas was just another young man roaming the New York film world, thinking about art but working on the commercial side of the business and increasingly loathing it. He thought about dropping film entirely, and even took jobs off-Broadway, stage-managing various small shows. That tack led him to a serendipitous moment that somehow, unpredictably, changed the face of the art world and eventually made Atlas the world's leading experimenter in dance video.

Merce Cunningham, by 1972 the acknowledged grand master of experimental dance, needed a stage manager; Atlas was available, and though he wasn't much involved in the dance scene, he admired Cunningham's work and joined the company. When Cunningham became intrigued by the new concept of dance video — a medium in which he had no experience — trained filmmaker Atlas jumped in.

"I certainly never intended to make dance videos when I joined Merce," said Atlas, on a recent visit to the Twin Cities. Yet Cunningham's trust and his willingness to experiment led to an enormously creative 13-year partnership, with Atlas carrying the title of filmmaker-in-residence through 1983.

What the pair created, works like "Westbeth" (1975), "Blue Studio" (1976), "Squaregame Video" and "Triangle" (1977), and "Fractions" (1978), combined dance and video in every way the two could dream up. About the only thing they didn't do was simply to tape dances documentary-style. Instead, they tried to discover how dance could make full use of the video medium, how it could use the special effects video offered, and even whether live dancing could be combined with video.

It was pioneer work. Before long Atlas became "the premier videologist in dance," as Bruce Jenkins of Walker Art Center calls him. He



Staff Photo by Merin Levison

Charles Atlas, the world's leading experimenter in dance video.

worked with film as well as video, but "never treated one differently from the other qualitatively," he said. "They're both part of the image-making process. Practical matters more than esthetic ones determined what was used."

The glory of tape, of course, is that it's much cheaper than film, and it can be recycled. With film, because of the expense, shots have to be calculated and carefully planned. Using tape, Atlas could aim for spontaneity, immediacy and the buzz of the moment.

Yet he did a lot of dabbling in film, both Super-8 and 16 mm., shooting short works featuring dancers such as Yvonne Rainer, Meg Harper, Sara Rudner and various performance artists, mainly to test the medium's possibilities. Certain films he made with Cunningham — "Locale" in 1980 and especially "Channels/Inserts" in 1981 — were highly regarded; many critics felt they set a new standard for dance on movie and TV screens.

By the early '80s, Atlas had begun to branch out. Cunningham had taken video about as far as he wanted to go, whereas Atlas felt he had just scratched the surface. In 1981, Atlas did a piece called "More Men" experimenting with a fictional style in which characters acted, taking video beyond the realm of simply showing a dance.

In 1982 and 1983, working with former Cunningham dancer Douglas Dunn, he created "Secret of the Waterfall," a collaboration with poets Reed Bye and Anne Waldman. A year later he did his first collaborative piece with young, new-wave dancer Karole Armitage, who was also a product of Cunningham's company.

Through Armitage he became acquainted with the young British dancer Michael Clark. Atlas was struck by Clark's natural ease in front of the camera, by his odd, enigmatic look, and by his sense of "cool."

ATLAS: New video mixes fact, fiction

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Atlas discovered early on what the British dance world has discovered during the past two years: that Clark, trained by the Royal Ballet but finding his artistic sustenance in the rock-fashion youth culture, had a natural magnetism. Clark (who is now 23) was only a teen-ager then and Atlas didn't know he would evolve into a highly popular choreographer. He did know he wanted to use Clark as the centerpiece of a new kind of anti-documentary dance film that would send up the look of *cinema vérité* by combining real-life footage with fictional. At the same time, he wanted to use Clark as a manifestation of the '80s youth culture, to capture his times through dance.

Initially, he wanted to do a modern version of the Narcissus myth. By the time he found backers (Britain's new channel 4 and Boston public-TV station WGBH), Clark was too old to play Narcissus and had exploded on the European dance scene and had become a media celebrity.

Atlas decided to do a sham "day-in-the-life" film using Clark and his company as well as his friends and collaborators, most of whom live on the cutting edge of Britain's lively camp-fashion, rock-club scene.

Initially called "Not Michael Clark," the film is now tentatively titled "The New Puritan." Since Clark had made his American debut last October at

the Ordway in St. Paul, Walker film curator Jenkins asked Atlas to have the world premiere showing at the Walker. It wasn't finished in time for the Dec. 20 date, so Atlas used his own money to transfer the rough cut to tape and flew it in from London personally. Though it hadn't been fully mixed, had only one active channel of sound and was still unedited, one could see clearly the new direction Atlas had taken.

In the film, dance virtually becomes a metaphor for the times. Using documentary techniques, especially the sense of spontaneity and "realness," the work is mostly staged. Although the incidents record real people in real places, they are mostly set up for their narrative value. Rehearsals in Clark's studio turn into lively performances, and a segment in a London rock club becomes almost a pop musical with an elaborately staged dance sequence.

"I hate art documentaries," said Atlas. "Documentaries always show less than the truth. Using fiction, I can deal with ambiguity, and like all fiction, show more than the truth. It's intentionally very artificial, yet behind the artifice and the phoriness is the reality which I'm hoping people will respond to — the same way they respond to the supposed reality of the documentary."

He shot the film over a few weeks' time in 1984. The film will premiere on British prime-time TV this spring, but because it shows bare bottoms,



Charles Atlas

includes raunchy language and one short homosexual love scene, Atlas isn't sure American TV will show it and will attempt to get it released in theaters instead.

"The New Puritan" was conceived entirely by Atlas. But as always, he worked very closely with his subject. "I work with people I like," he said, "and try to create work appropriate to the artists I'm working with. This film is the closest yet to capturing my personal concerns and interests, yet I of course wanted Michael (Clark) to be happy with it. But I don't like sitting around talking about projects. I believe in a process of

intuition and osmosis and so far it seems to have worked."

The medium of video is still in its infancy and Atlas would like to take it farther, into larger-scale works. "The New Puritan" is his first step in that direction. Yet he doesn't want the sickness of commercial TV. He likes the loose setups and formats of video, followed by very tight editing sessions. His problem is distribution.

Right now in this country the only real outlet is the new "Alive From Off Center" show produced here by KTCA-TV, on which excerpts of his video for Armitage were broadcast last season.

To expand his horizons, Atlas acknowledges that to some degree he is "tiptoeing out of dance." He would like to work with actors and he has an idea for a feature starring Clark that wouldn't be built entirely around dance.

"The New Puritan" has the possibility of reaching a larger audience," he said. "I've never set out to make works that wouldn't be seen by large audiences, but every time I've attempted conventional filmmaking it turns out to be too offbeat and weird. This one deals with the off-beat and therefore it might be more popular. At least it isn't a conventional dance documentary, not a bunch of dancers sitting around talking about classes and what they eat."