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The Poetry of Math

Jean Nuchtern

Lucinda Childs' choreography is not easy to penetrate. I've been looking at her work over the past few years, but last week was the first time I began to understand her intentions as well as appreciate the poetry of her mind.

Childs' creative world is based on mathematics, the poetry of geometric shapes as well as the beauty of mathematical ratios. In her solo, *Katema* (1978), she dances up and down a straight line. Determinedly, she moves along the line, makes me feel the tension of that shape and the urgency inherent in that simple form. But recognizing the shapes she carves is the easier part of my work. Understanding how she gets from point A to B is quite another matter. It is these two polarities that define one of the delicious ironies of her choreography. Her shapes are simple but her movement patterns — the way she uses mathematical ratios to reveal her movements' themes and variations — are exceedingly complex. (What must also be taken into account is that this reviewer almost flunked geometry.) In *Katema*, Childs does a few walks, steps into half plie, turns and walks back to place. She keeps repeating this pattern when suddenly I notice she no longer breaks from a step into the half plie, but the walk has become the plie. Using mathematical ratios to develop this pattern, Childs has managed to imperceptibly merge two steps. Which makes me understand something else about her work. This small, eye-opening variation indicates the mutability behind her outwardly rigid structures.

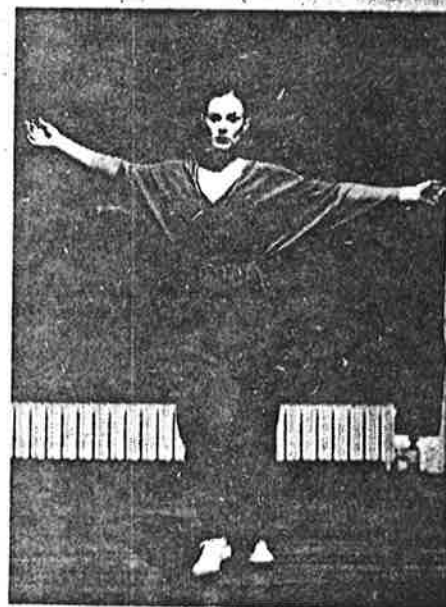
Her new solo, *Work in Progress with Philip Glass*, is one section from a larger piece. Here, Childs works with more complex shapes as she carves out four arcs, in

space as well as describes a straight line across the area. Again, Childs explores a minimum of movements: this work is based on two skips and a turn. As she dances energetically, perfectly inscribing each arc, she makes me think a lot. I sense an important contrast between the lines in her first two solos and the half circles in the latter one. The former shape is more direct and for some reason comes across as more frenetic. Perhaps it's because a line is not only a hard-edged but a man-made shape. When Childs moves back and forth along the arcs, however, I feel relaxed, soothed. Perhaps it's because the circle is a natural shape.

Harmony is another basic element in Childs' work. Because her movement patterns are worked out in terms of ratios, their proportions, and/or how long she does one phrase before it gets varied, seem even and right. The harmony inherent in her structures might be compared to that of J.S. Bach.

Another element in Childs' work is that there's an exciting play between two- and three-dimensionality. The geometric forms she works with are flat, two-dimensional shapes. (Draw them on paper.) By using them in dances, by taking them off the paper and putting them on her body, she adds depth and/or the third dimension.

Some people think Childs looks angry when she performs. I don't agree. Childs isn't concerned with projecting any kind of performing persona. That's not her bag. What she seems to be concerned with is how to make her work read as clearly as possible. What people perceive as anger is a combination of severity and a desire to make her work understandable. I see her less as a performer and more as a projection of her thoughts, as a vessel through which her ideas continually sift.



Lucinda Childs at the Kitchen: the poetry of geometric shapes

John Ebert

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