



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

“A formalist at heart, I am drawn to the genius of Merce Cunningham—the intricacies of his mind; his approaches that he invented making his dances; and his philosophies that he followed living his life and re-defining ideas about being human.

I am particularly moved by his story — an incredible triumph of the human spirit. During the first 30 years of his career (between 1942-1972), he persevered, with great determination and stamina, to make dances against all odds. He was always ready to get outside himself, to place himself in unknown situations, and find new solutions. All this took place in a unique artistic climate, during the 1950s and 1960s in New York, when Cunningham and his collaborators were “united by their poverty and ideas” and art and life had virtually no separation.

Merce’s dances evoke a sense of timelessness—a space in between rational and irrational, intellectual and emotional, immediate and eternal—that truly “renews” us. Yet I never imagined working with his choreography on film because of the complexity of his choreographic structures and his infinite explorations in time and space.

3D offers interesting opportunities as it articulates the relationship between the dancers in and to the space, awaking a kinesthetic response among the viewers. It also favors uncut choreographed shots, moving camera, and multiple layers of action in relation to the setting—everything that will allow working with Merce’s choreography on screen in new ways.

Merce and 3D represent an idea fit, not only because of his use of space but also because of his interest in every technological advancement of his time (from 16mm film to motion capture) and his willingness to adapt and work in unconventional settings/locations, creating over 700 Cunningham “Events,” i.e. performances comprised of excerpts from different dances adapted for a specific location with the audience following the dancers. This made me think that we could draw from many dances that Merce created over time and re-imagine each of them as an ‘event,’ set in a specific location, conveying a unique idea.

The final inspiration came when I saw an iconic photo of Merce’s dancers posing in the Robert Rauschenberg’s pointillist décor of his piece SUMMERSPACE, which was taken by Robert Rutledge in 1958. Merce staged this photograph himself by dropping Rauschenberg’s canvas on both the wall and the floor so it surrounded the dancers. It became clear to me that even back in the 1950s, before Merce developed the idea of an “event,” he had been longing to create immersive environments for his dances. Today, 3D allows for his dream to come true.

I conceived CUNNINGHAM as a 90-minute artwork in itself, which tells Merce’s story through his dances. The film is a hybrid, rooted in both imaginary worlds and moving life experiences. It aspires to find a delicate balance between facts and metaphors, exposition and poetry.

We selected excerpts from 14 dances, which represent two-thirds of the film. Each dance communicates an original Cunningham idea and includes iconic sequences adapted for 3D at locations indoor and out. A single camera approach is used to choreograph the viewer’s eye, highlighting the dimensional relationships among performers and settings, uniquely enabled by 3D technology. My hope is that the audience will have an experience reminiscent of ‘stepping inside’ the dances and being immersed in them.

The archival material (photographs, 16mm and 35mm footage, and home movies of performances, rehearsals, tours, and gatherings) – some of it never seen before – evoke the atmosphere of the time, while Merce’s diagrams and drawings provide insight into his creative process.

All the archival footage remains in 2D but we work with it as a sculptor would, collaging them in 3D cinema space. The aspiration has been to develop a unique language, integrating all the elements of the film in a subtle, distinct and poetic way – in Merce’s spirit.

All the stories in the film are told through archival recordings of Merce, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and the dancers. There are no talking heads or contemporary interviews. The voices, layered in an original soundscape, provide yet another pathway into the choreographer’s visionary mind.”

— Alla Kovgan

DIRECTORS’ OF CHOREOGRAPHY STATEMENTS

“Through the process of making this film, I have learned to see Merce’s work in a new way. Despite years of working with Cunningham as a dancer and a stager of his work, it wasn’t until Alla and I began working together that I started to uncover the nuances of the timing and spacing of Cunningham’s dances and began to appreciate more fully their complexity.

Right from the beginning, Alla was interested in the first 30 years of Merce’s in NYC. So Robert, Alla and I began by reviewing and selecting the most iconic dances from that

period. And from those dances, we then chose segments of Merce's choreography that would both work in 3-D and capture the quintessential moments of each dance.

Seeing a dance through the lens of a camera changes everything. While viewing a dance on a stage you are free to look anywhere in the space, whereas the camera has to be carefully and strategically placed as it guides the eye within the limits of its perspective. The lens often skews a shape. For instance, it can make an arm look lifted when it should simply be horizontal or it can distort the spacing dramatically. With the true artistic collaboration that we developed, these small details could be worked out seamlessly and we developed a true understanding for one another's point of view. Alla taught me about the world of filmmaking and I taught her about the inner workings of Merce's work.

When it came to editing, Alla, who decided to edit herself, given the complexity of understanding of dance on screen, began by assembling the shot material by dance. And we combed through each take, eliminating those with any obvious mistakes and only choosing the best in regards to performance and camera work. This part of the process was tricky in that we both were fighting for perfection and again had to compromise at moments which added another level of understanding for each of our respective expertise. This entire process took place with Alla in Berlin and me in New York, files flying digitally through cyberspace. It is amazing what technology allows.

We continued working with the live action material by piecing the segments of the dances together and finally, Alla edited them into one long sequence, creating a framework for the film. Some of our choices shifted after seeing the takes linked and with more context. I must have looked at each live action take a dozen or more times. One of the joys and mysteries of a live dance performance, is that it is ephemeral. It happens and then it is gone. Film is forever, so there is an enormous amount of pressure for the performers and an enormous responsibility in making the final choices on the takes.

After that, Alla began working with the archival materials, weaving the story and periodically checking in when large segments of the film were complete. We had to trim some of the live action material, which was to be expected, and required little discussion as we understood each other's needs so clearly at this point.

Finally, after months and months of work, I received the 'picture lock' file for review. I carved out some quiet time after my three-year-old was in bed and sat and watched the film from beginning to end. I made a conscious decision to watch it once for any final notes and again a few days later with a clear mind to simply enjoy. I was moved to tears.

There is a certain poignancy in hearing Merce's voice for those of us that knew and worked with him. But beyond that trigger of emotion is the fact that he and his early collaborators and dancers tell the story, in their own voices, which gives a weight and power to this film that is undeniable. The archival materials that Alla uncovered in her research are simply stunning and the live action scenes bring Cunningham's dances into the present tense, displaying how truly ahead of his time he was as an artist.

But what touched me most of all, was being reminded of the perseverance and determination of everyone involved in the formative years of the company and Cunningham's openness to the generations that followed. It is an honor to be part of this history and to be able to share his work once again on such a large scale.”

– Jennifer Goggans

“I was blessed to have worked for and to have followed Merce Cunningham in the various roles of dancer, teacher, assistant and finally director for 32 years. His influence on me is profound and everlasting. I am proud to be able to carry his legacy forward in one capacity, as a Merce Cunningham Trustee, and in another, as the director of the Centre National de la Danse Contemporaine in Angers, France.

In 2011, before the Merce Cunningham Dance Company disbanded, Alla Kovgan imagined creating a 3D cinematic portrait of Merce through his choreography. I immediately wanted to join the team. As we began working together, I became deeply impressed by how lucid Alla's ideas were and how, in the spirit of Merce, her vision is uncompromising and unusual in the world of dance film collaborations.

In CUNNINGHAM, the essence of Merce Cunningham's genius is brought to life through his work and by his former dancers engaging with the technological innovations, which he always embraced. His willingness to break boundaries has been infectious and engendered courage in all of us. This is reason enough that Merce Cunningham's work continues to be alive and growing. Shortly before his passing, he told me, "Find a way to go on." That ambiguity has emboldened my determination to continue. I have the great pleasure to work with and watch his work on a daily basis, but it should be shared with many more. With CUNNINGHAM, we have a precious opportunity to bring some of his greatest works to a wide, general audience."

– Robert Swinston