

Trisha Brown (1936 -)

by Elizabeth Zimmer

During a fifty-year career as a dance maker, beginning in 1961, Trisha Brown evolved from a rigorously experimental exponent of post-modern austerity to one of the world's most honored choreographers and opera directors. Her style ramified from the antic to the lyric, from solo works without music through exercises for a group of women in simple cotton shirts and trousers to fully produced dances and operas made in collaboration with some of the most distinguished visual and musical artists of the 20th century. She has choreographed nearly 100 works that have been presented in major theaters and art museums around the world, as well as on rooftops and on the sides of buildings. A new duet premiered as part of New York City Center's Fall for Dance series in late 2011.

A native of Aberdeen, Washington, Brown attended Mills College in Northern California and taught briefly at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Sports and hunting were part of her upbringing; she was deeply affected by the rural landscape, observing that her *idée fixe* was "the forest, a memory of dampness, broken light, unbelievable density, stillness and secrets" (Teicher, 282). In 1961 she moved to New York, where she was a member of the [Judson Dance Theater](#), studying composition with Robert Dunn. Her close friends and colleagues included experimental dancers like Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti; all three were influenced by [Ann \(now Anna\) Halprin](#) at workshops near San Francisco in the summer of 1960.

In the early years of her career Brown deliberately eschewed showing her work in ordinary theaters, choosing to perform in galleries, lofts, and on SoHo rooftops. Her community included many visual artists, and her process involved drawing as well as manipulating the body in space. In 1965 she moved into a loft on lower Broadway

where she still lives, in a building colonized by several of her dance-world compatriots. Brown first formed an ensemble, consisting entirely of women, in 1970, showing minimalist, conceptual works and touring them internationally.

Like [Merce Cunningham](#), one of her teachers, who was also a Washingtonian and elder statesman of the post-modern experimenters, Brown has been reluctant to ascribe external "meaning" to her steps and dances. The body in motion is her study; she was among the first choreographers to reference "releasing," "kinetic awareness," the Alexander and Klein techniques, and other manifestations of a field now identified as somatics.¹ In a 1979 conversation with Rainer she declared, "My work is about change—of direction, shape, velocity, mood, state" (Teicher, 49).

Perhaps her richest collaborative relationship was with pop artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), who began collaborating with Cunningham in the 1950s, worked with other choreographers, and also performed his own choreography. He designed works with Brown from the 1979 *Glacial Decoy* through the 1994 *If you couldn't see me*. He also served on the board of directors of her troupe. Other visual artists who worked with Brown include Terry Winters and Kenjiro Okazaki; lighting designer [Jennifer Tipton](#) was a frequent collaborator. Costume designers included Brown's husband Burt Barr, Nancy Graves, Donald Judd, Elizabeth Cannon, Judith Shea, Elizabeth Murray, and Roland Aeschlimann.

Having worked in silence for the first years of her choreographic exploration, Brown began incorporating music in the mid-1970s, using or commissioning sound from Bob Dylan, Laurie Anderson, J.S. Bach, John Cage, Peter Zummo, Anton Webern, Alvin

Curran, Salvatore Sciarrino, and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Her later works include several pieces in collaboration with jazz composer Dave Douglas, and beginning in 1985, several operas. In July 1998, while rehearsing her production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, she wrote, "I knew, in that moment, that the long haul of my apprenticeship in choreography was over" (Teicher, 293). She was 62 years old.

Her work up to 2001 was meticulously documented in a museum show, "Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961-2001," and in its accompanying catalogue. The show, assembled by and first shown at the Addison Gallery of American Art on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, subsequently toured the country through mid-2004. A more up-to-date chronology of her works can be found on her company's website.

In 2004 Brown made her first work for a ballet company, *O zlozony / O composite*, a trio for three stars of the Paris Opera Ballet, to music by Laurie Anderson. She was still performing in her own dances as late as 2007-2008.

Alumni of Brown's company include Wendy Perron, now editor of *Dance Magazine*; Stephen Petronio, the first male dancer to appear in her work and now director of his own troupe; and Diane Madden, still the company's rehearsal director. Lisa Kraus, who taught *Glacial Decoy* to dancers at the Paris Opera Ballet in 2003-2004, is now a teacher and critic in Philadelphia. Vicky Shick, one of many teachers in the TBDC's education program, has won many awards and has been creating her own work for more than 20 years. Former company members teach classes and workshops all over the world; emphasis is placed on "learning movement as the company does: with attention to detail, spatial clarity, performance quality, and an awareness of

dancing with others," according to the company's web site.

Brown's accolades and accomplishments include awards like the MacArthur "genius" grant (1991), two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award, and the New York State Governor's Arts Award, as well as the National Medal of Arts (2002), and induction into the Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Dance (2000). In late 2011, she received several honors, including a "Bessie" Award for Lifetime Achievement, presented on October 24 at the Apollo Theater, and the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, presented on November 2 at the Hudson Hotel to an artist "who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world." She has also been serving as a Rolex Mentor to Australian choreographer Lee Serle.

Company staff members report that a primary initiative as of 2011 is raising funds to secure the Trisha Brown Dance Company's Archives, now in the care of former dancers Cori Olinghouse and David Thomson.

NOTES:

1. Somatics, as currently used in academic settings, encompasses the various disciplines focusing on the integration of mind and body, like yoga, Pilates, Feldenkrais, postural integration, and other forms of body work.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Elizabeth Zimmer writes for *Ballet Review*, *Dance Magazine*, *Metro*, and other

publications. She edited the dance section of *The Village Voice* (1992-2006) and reviewed ballet for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1997-2005). She has covered dance in cities across North America, and taught writing and dance history at several universities. She edited *Body Against Body: The Dance and other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane* (Station Hill Press, 1989) and *Envisioning Dance for Film and Video* (Routledge, 2002), and developed a dance history curriculum for urban schools. Her one-woman show, *North Wing*, played off-off-Broadway. She has studied many forms of dance.