

Judson Church: Dance

by George Jackson

In 1962, Judson Church became the home for dance that differed from conventional performances in both text (the action and choreography) and context (the manner of presentation). Radical in its means and concepts, Judson influenced dance history. Categories such as modern dance and ballet, professional and amateur did not apply to Judson. Diversely trained dancers worked side by side with one another and with untrained performers. It wasn't always possible to distinguish between choreographer and performer. The dances might look like dances or like exercises, tasks or games. Those involved were discriminating omnivores who tried and discarded diverse means in the endeavor to define themselves as dancers. They disliked the disguises of conventional dance. Their work surprised returning audiences because Judson dancers in the early days didn't have signature styles and seldom repeated themselves: it was a brave new world each time. Stripped of much theatrical artifice, even declining to don the role of performer, the Judson dancers tried to stand and move naked of prescriptions – except that of being truthful to themselves.

The church, which belonged to a Baptist congregation, came to be the incubator for this new form of dance because of its location, mission and clergy. Situated at the heart of what was New York's arts neighborhood, Greenwich Village, the congregation wanted to reach out to the area's inhabitants. The church's ministers, Howard Moody and Al Carmines (who was also a composer), actively supported the arts. Among people dwelling "downtown," it was the dancers who had a special need: space in which to experiment. Unlike poetry, music or painting, dance can't be crammed into a tiny studio apartment. Judson Memorial Church is vast and was often vacant. The dancing that came to fill it was not one of America's then dominant

forms. Much of American performance dance had become old fashioned by 1960.

Dance after World War II sprouted from seeds planted long before. The split-atom classicism of [Balanchine](#) and Stravinsky's 1957 *Agon* sprang from their 1928 collaboration, *Apollo*. The independence of music and movement in Cunningham/Cage works had precedents in Serge Lifar's 1930s ballets in Paris and in some of the 1920s modern dance of Central Europe. Didactically, American dance was still steeped in formality, with Louis Horst's and [Doris Humphrey](#)'s tomes as key textbooks. America's other arts had changed – the revolution seems to have started with Beat literature. From writing and speaking it spread to the plastic arts with Pop painting, installations and happenings. Music began to abandon the classical Western tradition in favor of such vernacular values as simplicity and repetition, and of Eastern suspensions of time. American dance was definitely behind the times until 1960, when composer Robert Ellis Dunn (1928-1996) began organizing dance workshops. These met in [Merce Cunningham](#)'s dance studio (on the corner of Avenue of the Americas and 14th Street in New York City, in the same building as the Ausdruckstanz-derived Living Theater). Dunn's classes culminated in a concert held July 6, 1962 at Judson Church. Judson Dance Theater emerged from that concert.

Judson Dance Theater was a collective, democratic within the usual limits set by dominant personalities. Initially, both its rehearsals and concerts were public, and even the concerts were informal but not anarchic in their presentation. Officially, JDT lasted from 1962 to 1964 and gave 16 concerts, but what has come to be called "Judson dance" was broader and included some Judson Poets' Theater productions, independent undertakings by James Waring

and others from his ballet classes, amalgamations with the Pop painters' happenings, and even forays by practitioners of traditional modern dance who "converted". Venues included not just Judson Church but Pocket Theater, Gramercy Arts Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music's smaller theater, Hunter College Playhouse and diverse lofts and rooftops. On occasion, Judson Dance Theater performed on stages and in open spaces away from New York. When it disbanded, a new collective – Grand (also Grande) Union -- took its place for a while. The long-lasting [Dance Theater Workshop](#) was an offshoot.

Forms and techniques used by the Judson dancer-choreographers varied greatly, as had the assignments in Robert Dunn's classes. Unquestionably distinct were the physicality and personality of prominent individuals in the group. Judith Dunn, who oversaw JDT rehearsals and gave classes, impressed as a dancer-choreographer of staunch build, technical fortitude ([Martha Graham](#)-derived plus [Cunningham](#) modern) and stern personality (while married to Robert Dunn, but loosening up after they separated). Yvonne Rainer radiated clarity and generosity. Gracious while bold, Rainer's contours and behavior seemed chiseled - like those of movie star Marlene Dietrich, but her locks were brunette and not blonde. Steve Paxton had an eager edge; he was the all-American boy with pliant strength. Robert Morris seemed combative and was guarded. Lucinda Childs and Elaine Summers were womanly, with Childs neat and a little shy whereas Summers was cozier. Deborah Hay shifted thoughtfully between the formal and the casual. [Trisha Brown](#) boldly tackled reality's rules by walking on walls, trying to disregard gravity and playing with perspective. Aileen Passloff bounced like a ball; she was resilient, protective, motherly and yet balletic. Other participants included Alex Hay of the accurate athleticism,

inquisitive Jill Johnston, satisfied Robert Rauschenberg, quizzical Remy Charlip, James Waring of the lean-and-hungry ballet look, faun-like Fred Herko, and sensual Simone Forti (Morris).

Actions ranged all over the map, from Herko's *Cleanliness Act*, in which he scrubbed his nude body in his own spittle, to his balletic fairy tale *Palace of the Dragon Prince*. Rainer inflated a huge plastic bag inside of which Paxton practiced balances; for *Bach*, they moved solemnly, semi-balletically together without touching. Summers projected movies onto moving bodies. What persisted was the participants' physicality and personality, even when the individuals tried to shed their skin; it was a second generation Judson dancer-choreographer, William Dunas, who put an end to this phenomenon. In a series of ever longer solos, Dunas altered his appearance and projection drastically in a manner Central Europeans would have called *Ausdruckstanz* i.e., expressionist dance. In his first solo – gaunt, with bulging eyes -- he hurled himself against a brick wall until he bled. Thereafter he gained weight, lost weight, grew long hair, shaved his scalp, etc. for different solos. For his biblical *Job*, Dunas changed sex, dressing as an old hag who harangued God for over an hour. Finally, in the early 1970s, Dunas abandoned choreographing personas and lost himself in spaced-out, abstract pseudo-ballet.

The original Judson dancers eventually either stopped performing or succumbed to signature styles (Paxton's contact improvisation, Childs's minimalism). Yet the rich variety of the initial Judson years had been remarkable. Discernible influences on them included not just the experimental moderns Cunningham/Cage, [Paul Taylor](#) and [Ann \(later Anna\) Halprin](#). [Erick Hawkins](#) became simultaneously a source and a follower. Don Redlich tried to be as

avant garde as the Judson dancers, but his free-wheeling works were not as convincing as his conventional ones. Ballet's Balanchine choreography and its Mia Slavenska and Margaret Craske technique classes counted in Judson's pantheon. From Germany, Rudolf Steiner's vocalizations while moving were adopted for a while, as were the improvisations of German refugee Valeska Gert, via Living Theater's Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Prominent during the later Judson and post-Judson periods were Dunas, [Meredith Monk](#), Rudy Perez, David Gordon, Valda Setterfield, Art Bauman, Jeff Duncan, [Twyla Tharp](#), [Mark Morris](#) and Laura Dean.

Two critics established Judson's reputation, *The Village Voice's* Jill Johnston and *The New York Times's* Allen Hughes. Johnston reviewed Judson from the inside, as a participant or observer of the work being made, and began to write stream-of-consciousness accounts about all of life as a dance. Hughes remarked on Judson's "splendid chaos" in reviews that were matter-of-fact. Louis Horst censored favorable appraisals of Judson by writers for his *The Dance Observer* magazine. Among the many participants in Judson dance in its widest sense were Toby Armour, Eddie Barton, Maurice Blanc, Carla Blank, Sally Bowden, Carolyn Brown, Tina Croll, Jamie Cunningham, Douglas Dunn, Ruth Emerson, Sally Gross, Al Hansen, Elizabeth Keen, Kenneth King, Billy Kluever, Deborah Lee, Katherine Litz, Barbara Dilley Lloyd, Merle Marsicano, John Herbert McDowell, Phoebe Neville, Wendy Perron, Kathy Posin, Albert Reid, Arlene Rothlein, Berverly Schmidt, Robert Streicher, Kei Takei, David Vaughan, Andy Warhol, Jenny Workman and LaMonte Young. Those who were not trained dancers tended to be professional in another art.

What of Judson lasted? Still practiced today is the method of combining as dance the formal and casual--particularly pedestrian

actions, exercises and games, activities previously considered non-dance. Dance as process – doing movement rather than taking on roles – remains a goal. Straddling categories such as ballet and modern dance continues. Of course, ballet companies have performed some modern dance work since the turn of the 20th century. However, it is mostly Tharp, Mark Morris, and Dean in America and, in Europe, Wayne McGregor (influenced by Cunningham/Cage and Judson) and Bernd Bienert (Tanztheater-influenced) whose choreography really straddles the ballet/modern divide. The forms new in the 1960s -- Butoh in Japan, Tanztheater in Central Europe and Judson in North America – remain now, after the first decade of the 21st century, the last really revolutionary dancing that has happened.

George Jackson's first contact with dance was as a child figure skater in Vienna, Austria before World War II. Later he studied ballet and square dancing. Starting to write about dance for his college newspaper at the University of Chicago, he went on to review for the general press (*Washington Star*, *Washington Post*, *London Times*) and numerous specialist publications. He was a founding member of the Dance Critics Association. Most recently he has written for DanceView (and danceviewtimes.com), *Ballet Review* and *Dance Chronicle*.