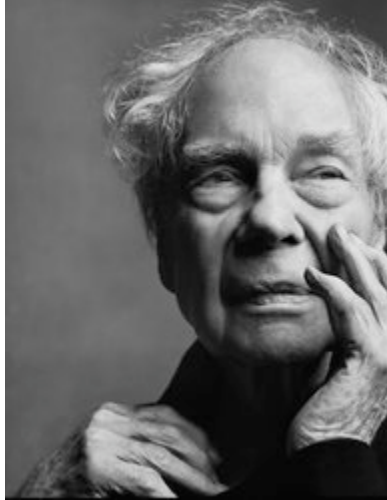


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Merce Cunningham, the renowned choreographer who died Sunday at 90, threw many traditions out the window during his 60-year career, forcing people to rethink the very nature of dance.
Mark Seliger, Merce Cunningham Dance Company photo, via AP

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Choreographer Cunningham wrote his own rules for dance

BY POLLY ANDERSON, The Associated Press

NEW YORK - Choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham was hailed Monday as a revolutionary artist who remade the very definition of dance.

Cunningham -- who was still working as he marked his 90th birthday just 3-1/2 months ago -- died on Sunday at his Manhattan home, said Leah Sandals, spokeswoman for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. She said he died of natural causes but declined to elaborate.

The onetime Martha Graham dancer was credited with remaking modern dance by creating works of pure movement divorced from storytelling and even from musical accompaniment.

"I'd rather find out something than repeat what I know," he once said. "I prefer adventure to something that's fixed."

In a career that spanned more than 60 years, Cunningham determined steps by chance -- saying it freed his imagination -- and shattered unwritten rules such as the need for dancers to face the audience and keep time with the music.

Reacting to his death, the great New York City Ballet dancer Jacques d'Amboise said Monday that Cunningham "made everybody rethink what is dance: Is it just movement to time? Does it have to be synchronized? Can it be improvised? Can it be spontaneous? He played with all

these ideas."

Cunningham worked closely with composer John Cage, his longtime partner who died in 1992, and with visual artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. But, he said, "I am and always have been fascinated by dancing, and I can just as well do a dance without the visual thing."

Among his creations - more than 150 in all: "Sounddance," 1975; "RainForest," 1968; "Septet," 1953; "Exchange," 1978; "Trackers," 1991; "Pictures," 1984; "Fabrications," 1987; "Cargo X," 1989; and "Biped," 1999.

Though he had to use a wheelchair in later years, he premiered a long piece called "Nearly Ninety" as he reached that age milestone in April. It was set to new music from Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones, the rock band Sonic Youth, and Japanese composer Takehisa Kosugi.

He also had recently set up a new organization, the Merce Cunningham Trust, to preserve his choreography for future artists, scholars and audiences

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North Carolina ties

Cunningham had two significant connections to North Carolina: through his long association with the American Dance Festival in Durham and, dating back to the 1940s, his work at Black Mountain College near Asheville.

"We've lost a world icon," Charles Reinhart, director of the American Dance Festival, said Monday.

Before the dance festival moved to Durham in 1977, Cunningham studied with the ADF, and later the organization commissioned several of his works. At the 1982 festival, Cunningham received the Samuel H. Scripps Award for Lifetime Achievement in Choreography, only the second time the award had been given.

Reinhart said the ADF would make plans to honor Cunningham's legacy next season. "This is something we're thinking of for next season starting today," he said.

Cunningham was an integral part of the avant-garde coterie at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Along with artists and thinkers like John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Alfred Kazin, Cunningham helped shape ideas that changed the arts in the 1950s and 60s.

"It was a sharing of ideas; it was how I a painter, I a composer, I a choreographer can express those ideas," Reinhart said. "The art forms were not isolated from one another, and Merce was all a part of that."

Staff writer Katherine Miller

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