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Merce Cunningham Dance Co, Barbican Theatre, London

Reviewed by Zoë Anderson

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Some stage pictures are instantly gripping. When the curtain goes up on Merce Cunningham's *Crises*, two dancers stand some distance apart. They're turned at an angle to each other, poised but watchful. Light slants through a haze. In a moment, *Crises* has a powerful use of stage space and atmosphere. It's a knockout from its first second.

Made in 1960, *Crises* is the earliest of three works on this programme. The most recent, *XOVER*, was created last year. At 89, Cunningham has had decades of invention and innovation, and shows no signs of slowing down. The return of this great American choreographer is the best possible start to this year's Dance Umbrella.

In Cunningham's works, the different elements are created separately: music, steps and design are brought together for the first performance. The mystery is how that separation can create such unified works. *Crises*, a work haunted by strange drama, was designed by the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who had a long association with this company. His costumes are simple leotards, in gorgeous shades of red.

Rauschenberg's designs for *XOVER* include a collage backdrop, with bright images of a bicycle and road barriers. The music is by John Cage, two works played simultaneously. Vocalist Joan La Barbara groans and creaks from the stage.

Cunningham's dancers are magnificent. Backs are clear and strong, feet cleanly stretched. Their balance is astonishing.

The evening ends with *BIPED*, a superb, shimmering work from 1999. Computer imagery, glinting costumes and Gavin Bryars's luscious score come together, glowing and transcendent.

To 4 October (0845 120 7550)