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DANCE REVIEW | 'OCEAN'

Multidimensional Movements Echo the Depths and Horizons of the Sea

By [ALASTAIR MACAULAY](#)

WAITE PARK, Minn. — We speak of space and the body as both being three-dimensional. As the Merce Cunningham Dance Company danced his 90-minute work “Ocean” on a specially erected stage in the Rainbow Quarry here on Thursday and Friday nights, it often seemed that the dimensions of each were doubled.

Simultaneously a dancer would project both ahead and behind, to right and left, upward and downward. Or alternately: Mr. Cunningham’s dancers are specialists at immediate and seamless changes of direction. I have seen “Ocean” in four different places since its 1994 premiere in Brussels, and this quality grows more striking with further acquaintance. In the Waite Park quarry, Brandon Collwes did pairs of powerful jumps down one diagonal, except that the second reversed direction so he landed facing backward.

Emma Desjardins performed pirouettes, her body outstretched, facing down to the floor, and then in a moment changed position so that she carried on turning but now faced upward. If you want to pursue the title “Ocean,” then these movements, echoed by other dancers, help you feel its horizons, its depths and skies, its mercurial changefulness.

The multidimensionality of Mr. Cunningham’s work was exceptional long before he created “Ocean,” but there may be no work in which it registers more. Always performed in the round, this was probably the culmination of his first phase (starting in 1989) of composing dance movement on a computer, developing a rigorous new coordination of body parts.

It is also a culmination of a long interest in the later work of [James Joyce](#). Mr. Cunningham first arrived in New York at age 20, in 1939, the year of the publication of “Finnegans Wake,” and he and [John Cage](#) soon became friends with Joseph Campbell, the Jungian scholar of mythology who in 1944 published, with Henry Morton Robinson, “A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake.”

Many things about “Finnegans Wake” — among them its exuberance, neologisms, multiple layerings, structural freedom and sense of the heroic — inspired Cage and Mr. Cunningham. And Campbell, in telling them that Joyce’s next work would have been about the ocean, planted a

seed that finally, after Mr. Cage's own death, became this 90-minute epic.

Extraordinary as sheer invention, "Ocean" is a magnum opus I admire without loving; I can't lose myself in it as theater poetry. If I never see "Ocean" again live — it was being filmed here by Charles Atlas — I will not mourn it as I do "Roaratorio," "Five Stone Wind" and many other Cunningham works. But our sense of his range would be narrower without it.

Contrasts and paradoxes abound. Daniel Squire rushes on to the empty stage to brace himself in an open-legged stance that stretches backward and looks up. Julie Cunningham emerges from a fluent pirouette into a still-held forward-stretching arc whose eventually up-curving front arm takes you by surprise. Frequently you see jumps that travel forward but where the legs fan out sideways in the air. Turns abound (slow whirlpools) in which the torso is off-center.

Amid these dances it's possible at times to see strange seabirds, shoals, boats, mariners, modernist takes on imagery from the "Odyssey" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," though they don't cohere. There are more marvelous things I can't explain: scenes that make me feel these dancers are coping with the tilting surfaces of mighty waves, others where they seem to be submerged beneath the surface and others that make me see precisely how far above the water this flock is flying with wings outstretched, occasionally shifting its formation.

Mainly "Ocean" compels as sheer movement. An injury prevented Andrea Weber from performing — I am still haunted by ecstatic jumps she did in the 2006 "Ocean" performances in London — but even without her, the troupe abounds in superb, and superbly differentiated, artists. Its newest man, Silas Riener, and Mr. Collwes looked alike only a year ago; now they're opposites. Mr. Riener — in more thrilling shape at each performance — dances boldly and decisively, an adventurer and lawgiver who makes marvelous things happen. Mr. Collwes dances with soft power, a blithe dreamer to whom marvels unfold.

Koji Mizuta has a brisk series of exultant jumps on one spot, turning while his legs fan sideways; Daniel Madoff does pairs of jumps that seem to be pivoted in midair by his drastic changes of arm position, and he knows the Cunningham drama of ending a sequence by sharply turning his head sideways, eyes focused on a new object. The slim steel of Ms. Cunningham's line is a pleasure unlike the rich curves of Ms. Desjardins's, and neither resembles the intense Holley Farmer.

Each dancer wears a series of three costumes, designed by Marsha Skinner and Suzanne Gallo. In the open night air at Waite Park the dresses blew beautifully. Aaron Copp's lighting added powerful shadow dramas.

Was one of the horn players on Thursday night teasing Mr. Cunningham? Just before the performance began, he gave us the theme from "The Godfather."

