

La Opinión

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Rock On, Merce Cunningham

***The world's greatest living modern-dance choreographer presents
his stellar troupe at the Ahmanson Theater***

Para Debra Levine, especial para Espectáculos

Merce Cunningham had never heard of Radiohead or Sigur Ros. That was before his young manager convinced the 84-year-old choreographer that staging "Side Splits" to a sound score by two European rock bands would attract a new audience.

Merce-purists went into an immediate state of shock. Rock bands? Even if arty and cool; even if from the U.K. (Radiohead) or Iceland (Sigur Ros); collaborating with commercially successful musicians just seemed wrong for Cunningham. For decades, Cunningham performances were notorious for challenging electronic sound scores provided by Merce's life partner, avant-garde composer John Cage, who was hardly a popular success. (Cage died in 1992.)

When "Side Splits" debuted in New York as part of the company's 50th anniversary celebration in 2003, rock critics loved it. But the Cunningham faithful got a real earful when Radiohead fans screamed and hollered their way through the performances.

"Side Splits" will be the main attraction when the Merce Cunningham Dance Company rocks the house at the Ahmanson Theater this weekend. (L.A. shows feature taped scores, not live band appearances.)

Long the high priest of the most abstract variety of modern dance, no one would have guessed Merce Cunningham would still be making dances in his mid-eighties. Born and raised in Seattle, Cunningham got his start as a sprightly and lithe member of the Martha Graham Dance Company from 1939 – 45. After breaking from Graham, he developed a dance vocabulary of quirky, almost neurotic, energy that suited the Cold War era. The Cunningham Company launched in 1953, at which point the great choreographer began his prodigious creative outpouring of over 200 works.

Cunningham's one big idea (he never abandoned it his entire career) was to treat dance, music, and painting/design as co-existing arts that synergize but never dominate one another. Multimedia performance art was born.

His dance troupe's influence on the downtown visual arts scene was enormous. Famous painters like Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol contributed sets and costumes. And Cunningham's own dappled choreography is often compared to an abstract painting sprung to life.

The staging choices of his choreography reflect Cunningham's egalitarian flair. Starring roles are sparse, and the stage lacks a clear focal point, or visual center. Instead, every dancer and movement is separate but equal, with all parts contributing to the whole. The "canvas" that Cunningham "paints" requires an active eye to appreciate, but many viewers find this exciting.

To construct "Side Splits," Cunningham employs a "chance" technique he has craftily used for decades. Every crucial building block of the dance—choreography, music, costumes, décor, lighting—was created in pairs. The order in which the two options

are assembled is decided by a toss of the dice at the start of every performance. Altogether 32 potential combinations exist.

How does decision-making by rolling the dice affect a dance performance? It gives it the vitality and unpredictability of real life. It adds a dollop of irony, because the Great Artist is slyly admitting that his own choices and preferences are equal to, or even less compelling than, the toss of dice.

Can you take it? Audience attrition—the early walk-out—is an unfortunate tradition of Cunningham performances. To get the best from a Cunningham performance, open your eyes and ears; absorb it as naturally as a walk in the park, or a day at the beach.

Cunningham dancers are among New York's finest. The entire audio/visual experience is so stimulating your brain may tingle for days. You may join the many well wishers who urge the great master to "Rock on!"