

# Merce Cunningham: symbolism in dance



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Merce Cunningham is one of the pioneers in the field of dance and choreography. He had been a mentor to most of the choreographers who have now become major names in modern times. In addition, there are certain body movements and symbolism in his dancing techniques that make him a distinctive pioneer in choreography; also, there are numerous choreographic pieces by Merce Cunningham that are still being imitated by many choreographers of our present time. Most importantly, I have analyzed the dancing techniques, music, costumes, and movements in certain dancing pieces by Merce Cunningham. The choreographic pieces that I have analyzed for this purpose are “ Changing Steps,” “ Deli Commedia,” and “ Beach Birds for Camera.”

The choreography piece “ Changing Steps” profoundly reflects the true geometrical dancing manner of Merce Cunningham. As per my analysis, Merce Cunningham had made use of steps and body gestures in the form of dance to reflect movement. I observed that Merce Cunningham has been successful in highlighting that subtle and weightless footwork has been used to form the dancer’s movement. Moreover, when the dancers change their body gestures quickly, that left an impression of light weighted foot stepping. Additionally, I have also observed that in order to create extensions to the movements of the body, special focus has been made on certain movements, such as the physical contact among the dancers during the sequence (Merce Cunningham Dance Company).

In my view, the highlight of the dance sequence is that it is another successful collaboration of music and choreography by John Cage and Merce Cunningham respectively. The work done by the cooperation of both invites

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the spectators to experience something that has never been focused on before; which is the way the collaboration had presented joy and freedom through the context of the dancing steps of the dancers. I believe that the collaboration of John Cage and Cunningham is the success factor as the dancing language of Cunningham is independent, but somehow John Cage's music is irreplaceable. I also think that John Cage's music in the dancing piece works as a catalyst. In addition, I would also like to mention that the wider acclaim to the dance sequence " Changing Steps" is increased because of the three-dimensional gesture stepping. Three-dimensional gesture stepping means that three dancers collaborate and make body movements that together make up a three-dimensional posture (Copeland).

Furthermore, the costumes used in the choreography sequence have been designed by Mark Lancaster. The colors of the costumes are single toned and darker colors. The costumes in the three-dimensional stepping had been used in a way that two of the dancers wear the same colored costume while the third dancer wears another color (Merce Cunningham Dance Company).

My experience with the dance sequence " Changing Steps" has been full of delight. The dance sequence greatly reflects an entirely new idea and form of dance. The usage of the title perfectly suits the dancing sequence, and as viewed in the sequence, changing in steps has been quite swift, thus, the title also elaborates the same idea. Also, the flow of stepping in the dance sequence of " Changing Steps" is so powerful that the spectator would feel that he or she is actually dancing with the dancers. I observed that in the beginning of the dance sequence the choreography has been done in a way that makes a rectangular box and further forms a curved structure of

stepping and to me, the setting appeared to be something that I did not expect in a dance. In addition, I think that the union of dancers after every three-dimensional stepping of feet appeared to be amazingly active and fresh.

Moving on to another great piece by Merce Cunningham entitled “ Deli Commedia.” “ Deli Commedia” is another accurately choreographed piece that represents the legacy of his contributions to the dance. He contributed in the field of dance by introducing the concept of geometry in his dance sequences. For instance, I have observed the concepts of geometry when one dancer stood perpendicularly while other dancers made curves through molding their bodies into an arch-like structure. Moreover, the costumes which have been used in the dance sequence were rather colorful, which exactly matched the theme of the stage. The usage of colors such as blue, yellow, green, magenta etc. is catchy which creates a distinction every time a new fragmentation is made while dancing. “ Deli Commedia” reflects the collaboration of the musician, John Cage as the music played during the sequence holds beats in a synthesized manner (Ib50ib50 Channel). “ Deli Commedia” managed to impress me as the dance sequence was filled with fragmentation and quick body movements, and I also liked the colorful costumes of the dancers which made use of the stage distinctively.

Last but not least, the choreography sequence of “ Beach Birds for Camera” illustrates the movement of coastal areas. The inspiration that I got from such a dance piece is freedom because the stepping of the feet and hand gestures are more bird-like movements. Birds usually symbolize freedom and the basic intrigue that one would get by applying the dancing gestures

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as in “ Beach Birds for Camera” explains the Eastern dance themes. I also noticed that the theme of Eastern dance is evident from Cunningham’s dance sequence because Eastern dancers perform in a way that is apparently similar to that of dancers of Beach Birds. Most of the Eastern dances are especially choreographed in outdoor locations reflecting nature (Copeland). The idea of stepping that illustrates the scenario of beach birds gives a joyful awakening in the field of the dance. “ Beach Birds for Camera” is another victorious teamwork between Merce Cunningham and John Cage. According to my perspective, the music and choreography had complimented the theme of the ocean as the dancers use fragments imitating the effect of water, also the music of the dance sequence sounds like rain drops, or drops of water (lb50ib50 Channel).

If I compare “ Beach Birds for Camera” and other dance sequences by Merce Cunningham, I have observed here that the fragmentation is used lesser in this sequence, and the layering of the body gestures is most prominent, which is something that I have liked, and what I mean about the layering of the body gestures is in terms of the postures the dancers take where they come in contact with other dancers through leg touch, or back touch. Also, the change in directions is more obvious than in any other dance sequence making the spectators navigate towards the dancing steps more (Merce Cunningham Dance).

Moreover, the costumes designed by Marsha Skinner are according to the theme of the dance sequence. The costumes are especially made black and white in order to reflect the color of coastal birds; also, the use of black and white enhances the body gestures used in the fragmentation manner (Daly).

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I believe that costumes greatly suited the main theme of the dance sequence.

Through my analysis of the three dance sequences by the collaboration of Merce Cunningham, the choreographer, and John Cage, the musician, it comes to my understanding that the field of dance had been made wide because of the legendary collaboration. In addition, being a spectator of such dance sequences helped me observe the development that has taken place in terms of the dance. I would also say that the development which had taken place in dancing by the advent of geometrical dance sequences by Merce Cunningham in 1956; also, making Merce Cunningham a legendary figure in making use of fragmentation, body gestures in a layering manner, and foot stepping. Overall, my experience of watching dance sequence by Merce Cunningham was joyful and thoroughly entertaining.