

Merce Cunningham's "Walkaround Time"

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Merce Cunningham's remarkable work, "Walkaround Time" was filmed in beautiful color and with a knowing respect for the choreography by Charles Atlas who was the Cunningham company's production stage manager and who collaborated with Cunningham on a number of video events in later years.

The dance work, in some respects, is a difficult one. It is unusually long (48 minutes) and rather wry, understated, and spare. It is filled with wonderful happenings, but they emerge quietly and, of course, in Cunningham's own time.

I think "Walkaround Time" is, purely and simply, a masterwork. Furthermore in its quiet, ambling way it illustrates many of those elements that go to make up Cunningham's greatness as a choreographer. While it may be a mistake to throw this film at an over-expectant and under-prepared audience, the film does show what Cunningham is all about and it can make lifetime converts of those who can learn to meet the choreographer on his own terms.

In a way it may be especially valuable to have this work available on film because one of the medium's special virtues is that it can be shown over and over again and "Walkaround Time" is so filled with quiet happenings and exquisite surprises that no one could conceivably get a full appreciation in a single viewing.

Marcel Duchamp

In discussing "Walkaround Time" it is probably best to start with its extraordinary décor—and with Marcel Duchamp.

Duchamp was an artist generally classified somewhere between Dada and surrealism whose output is marked by its originality, its wittiness, and its ability to stir controversy—characteristics, of course, also of Cunningham who is a great admirer of Duchamp's work.

Duchamp was responsible for the famous painting "Nude Descending a Staircase" that so scandalized New York at the historic Armory Show of 1913.¹ He later went on to challenge aesthetic theories with his "readymades"—an ordinary object like a snow shovel, a bottle rack, a porcelain urinal, a typewriter dust cover would be framed or decked out as a work of art. And he gave his considered view of Tradition by presenting as his own signed work a reproduction of the "Mona Lisa" with a moustache painted on (he later presented the painting without the moustache and titled it "shaved").

The work often considered to be Duchamp's greatest is "The Large Glass, or The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even," created on a free-standing pane of glass. The work was begun in 1915 and declared to be in a state of "definite incompleteness" by 1923.²

It is in two parts. The top section represents the bride (or the "bride machine")—a horizontal cloud-like formation connected to a vertical contraption. The bottom section shows the nine "bachelors"—represented by some brown cylinder-like shapes—and four other items: a chocolate grinder, a series of cones, a sleigh with a water wheel, and a cluster of delicate circular designs. Duchamp has explained at length how all these shapes interrelate.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duchamp>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bride_Stripped_Bare_By_Her_Bachelors,_Even

For the decor for "Walkaround Time" the various parts of "The Large Glass" have been translated onto a set of large semi-transparent vinyl boxes by Jasper Johns who has been the Cunningham company's artistic advisor since 1966. The two "bride" sections are hung upstage and the five sections from the "bachelor" portion are distributed around the stage so that the dancers pass in front of, around, and behind them.³

David Behrman's score for "Walkaround Time" also reflects a Duchampian perspective—in fact its title, "...for nearly an hour..." is taken from the title of a Duchamp work. It consists of several "readymade" sounds some of which—tramping in gravel, automobile engines—also suggest walking or traveling. The last section of the score is a gabble of female voices discussing "The Large Glass."

The dance work

In various ways the choreography pays tribute to Duchamp (who attended the premiere on March 19, 1968 in Buffalo).⁴ This is done most simply and elegantly at the very beginning and at the end as Cunningham lets Duchamp have the first and last words in the dance work in much the same way as Doris Humphrey salutes the Bach music in her "Passacaglia" (also available on film).

As the curtain goes up on "Walkaround Time" the nine dancers stand quietly posed around the stage allowing the audience the leisure to peruse the stunning decor. The first movements are quiet, stylized bows—with their legs spread in various positions the dancers slowly and in their own time plie and bend over from the waist, then rise again to a standing position with their arms blossoming out and upward. The dancers are positioned in a pattern that reflects the spacing of the nine "bachelor" objects in the "The Large Glass."

The ending is equally exquisite. The boxes from the "bachelor" portion of "The Large Glass" are moved upstage under the suspended "bride" boxes and assembled to approximate the way they are arranged in "The Large Glass." (It was reportedly Duchamp's idea to do this somewhere in the dance work.) Then the dancers quietly mill around (walk around) behind the assembled decor and finally, shortly before the curtain descends, they can be seen to seat themselves in a line on the floor behind it.

Other choreographic references to Duchamp relate to the Dada-inspired ballet, "Relâche," which Duchamp helped with and in which he appeared. The ballet was given by Rolf de Mare's Swedish Ballet in Paris in 1924. Its music was by Erik Satie, a composer especially revered by Cunningham.

"Walkaround Time" has a structure similar to that of "Relâche": it is in two parts separated by an "intermission" for the performers, but not for the audience. (Of course "The Large Glass" is also in two parts.) In "Relâche" the "intermission" was given over to a zany fast-paced film by Rene Clair called "Entr'acte" which included a scene showing Duchamp playing chess with Man Ray; Satie was also in the film.⁵

In the 7-minute "intermission" of "Walkaround Time" the house lights come part way up

³ <http://www.nancydalva.com/2011/02/jasper-johns-and-decor-for-walkaround.html> Johns' set elements for "Walkaround Time" are now in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

<http://collections.walkerart.org/item/object/10269>

⁴ <http://www.nancydalva.com/2011/11/duchamp-cage-johns-buffalo-1968-photo.html> Duchamp died on October 2, 1968, seven months after the premiere of "Walkaround Time," at the age of 81.

⁵ http://www.ubu.com/film/clair_entracte.html

and the music changes to the wallpaper/cocktail-lounge type and later to the recorded efforts of a wonderfully inept soprano. The dancers lounge on the stage, stretching, talking quietly, and, well, walking around (but not playing chess). It's been suggested that a point here is to suggest the "readymades" again—to display the dancers in the ordinary, everyday movement that, properly framed, can be seen to take on a beauty of its own.

After the "intermission," the second part of "Walkaround Time" begins with another apparent reference to "Relâche." Cunningham, upstage behind one of the larger boxes, can be seen to be jogging in place. As he does so he changes his clothes—he removes his tights and shirt and replaces them with another pair of tights and shirt of identical color. In the second section of "Relâche" there was a passage, preserved in a published still photograph, in which nine men in tuxedos lined up across the stage and calmly took off their formal gear revealing their spangled long underwear, and then redressed.⁶ Cunningham's solo may also relate to the story that Duchamp himself fleetingly appeared on stage in "Relâche" in the nude (except for a false beard and a strategically placed apple) in the role of Adam.⁷

Duchamp is suggested, at least to me, in other choreographic elements. In "The Large Glass" the "bride" is kept serenely separate from her attending suitors, the "bachelors." In "Walkaround Time" there are long solos for women, Valda Setterfield near the beginning and, particularly, Carolyn Brown in the second half. In this the soloist is from time to time accompanied by little spurts of activity by other dancers who come on stage, engage in a choreographic commentary (usually frenetic), and then vanish. The soloist, meanwhile, proceeds calmly and obliviously.

And, of course, the entire choreographic aesthetic of "Walkaround Time," at once austere, whimsical, transparent, and meticulous, is like that of "The Large Glass" and is one likely to appeal to someone with Duchamp's sensibilities.

To get, finally, to the choreography directly. It is rather common to hear that Merce Cunningham has demonstrated that "anything can go with anything." There is a sense, I suppose, in which that's true. However the slogan can lead one to expect choreographic jumbles in Cunningham's work and it can hamper a perception of the elements that go into making each of his works distinctive.

Like Doris Humphrey, Cunningham often shows a preference for exploring a limited number of movement ideas in a single dance work. "Winterbranch," as Cunningham has pointed out, is "about" the "fact" of falling. An aerial solo would be out of place. By contrast "Summerspace" has a great deal to do with covering and shaping the stage space and there is scarcely a fall in it. "Sounddance" is "about" "packed activity," he has said, and "Landrover" is "about" traveling over different landscapes. In works like "Place," "Rebus," "Solo," and (I gather) "Second Hand" there seems to be a narrative, atmospheric, or emotional thread.

Besides the Duchamp homage, the choreographic theme in "Walkaround Time" seems to be the idea of progressing (of walking) across the proscenium space from one side to the other.

The sparest expression of this is given to Meg Harper at one point: she simply walks across the stage. At another Susana Hayman-Chaffey does the same, except that she pauses

⁶ <http://library.calvin.edu/hda/node/2196>

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http://www.artnet.com/galleries/artwork_detail.asp?G=&gid=111920&which=&aid=16244&wid=425949262&source=inventory&rta=http://www.artnet.com The section may also, of course, relate to the Nude Descending a Staircase.

briefly, then walks off. At the end of Carolyn Brown's major solo, filled with expectant stillnesses, she comes to "rest" on high demi-point; and Cunningham walks through, puts his arm around her waist, and carries her off. (The bachelor gets the bride in that case.)

The idea is developed at its most complex in a beautiful duet for Harper and Douglas Dunn. They progress across the stage, but the progress is halted and temporarily reversed at times, tortured almost, as they lean and pull against each other.

There are many applications of the idea: the dancers travel across in leaps, in hops with fluttering kicks; Cunningham's jogging that sets each half of the work in motion; Dunn begins a solo on the left, poses, and is carried by several dancers to the other side where, replaced, he continues the solo. (Some of Dunn's poses suggest the Rodin sculpture, "Walking Man.")⁸

But the most extraordinary expression comes near the end of the work in a contrast between a minimum and maximum walk: as Cunningham inches himself across the stage moving only his feet, Sandra Neels is given a slow motion, expansive run, choreographed down to the finger tip. (More "Relâche"? There is a slow motion run in the "Entr'acte" film.)

Along with developments on this central thematic idea, there are examples, some fleeting, of signature elements of Cunningham's choreography. His "machines," for example, where clusters of dancers will bunch together moving as a single quirky organism—they seem to suggest the "grinder" or "water wheel" in the lower section of "The Large Glass." Or an amazing splintering of brilliant portions of Setterfield's solo between her and Neels: they will be in unison, one will break out of the dance, walk a few steps, and then pick it up on a later portion of the phrase. Or, shortly before the ending, a Humphreyesque summary of many of the choreographic elements presented earlier, including the opening bows.

The film

Charles Atlas has filmed "Walkaround Time" with quiet integrity. The film gives a very good feel for how the work looked on stage and for how the choreography shaped itself in the space. Even where one can't see everything at once, the film almost always lets the viewer know where (and if) things are happening. Of course in the case of "Walkaround Time" the decor sometimes obscures some of the choreography from some of the audience, but one always knows where things are happening even if they cannot be made out completely, and it is this feeling that is kept on the film.

As mentioned, a highlight of the dance work is a long solo for Carolyn Brown with moments of considerable quiet—floating like Duchamp's "Bride"—during which little explosive events occur among the other dancers. Another filmmaker might cut to these lesser, but more kinetic, events, ignoring the soloist. Atlas, on the other hand, always keeps the soloist in the viewer's perspective.

And toward the end he provides one of the most beautiful moments in all dance films: instead of following Sandra Neels in her exquisite slow motion run, Atlas fixes the camera on one spot, allowing her slowly to progress across its field of view from frame edge to frame edge—a kind of camera eye perspective of the basic movement idea Cunningham is exploring in the dance work.

There are some bad moments early in the film—some jiggly camera work, some overly-close shots—and at times the camera seems a bit too distant, but these prove to be minor

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Walking_Man

problems. In creating the film Atlas had originally intended a special mode of projection. The first section would be projected in the usual way, but the second section and the "intermission" were to be shown in two views: two separate reels shown simultaneously by two interlocked projectors on a double-width screen. Because of technical difficulties, it has only rarely been shown that way.

Among the values of this film is that it preserves the performances of some extraordinary Cunningham dancers no longer with the company. There is Valda Setterfield at her brightest and wittiest, the beautifully controlled Sandra Neels and Susana Hayman-Chaffey, the forceful Douglas Dunn, and Carolyn Brown, who can make an event of cosmic proportions out of simply standing still. Also on the film, besides those already mentioned, are Chase Robinson and Ulysses Dove, both seen rather briefly.⁹

Notes and background material

As it happened, I attended the premiere performance of Merce Cunningham's "Walkaround Time" in Buffalo, NY, on March 19, 1968. In 1970, I began to teach a course, "Dance as an Art Form," at the University of Rochester where I was employed as a political scientist, and continued to do so for some 20 years. From the beginning, I was interested in using film and videotape in the course and was able to purchase a 16mm print of the "Walkaround Time" film which I then showed and discussed in my class every year. For several years I wrote a column on dance films for *Dance Magazine* and devoted the July 1977 column to Atlas' film. In those days, pages were dummied up using a scissors and paste approach. At some point the editors decided to rearrange my "Walkaround Time" piece to fit in a different way on the page. They snipped it into pieces to do so, but they unfortunately somehow managed to reassemble the pieces in the wrong order in a process that might have amused Merce Cunningham, but did not amuse me.

The article above is that piece arranged in the right order with a few cuts restored and a few minor repairs made. I have also added links (hardly an imaginable development in 1977) that may be helpful to the reader.

This has been posted in the last month of the formal existence of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company which has meant so much to me over the years.

The "Walkaround Time" film has now been digitized, receiving its first showing as part of Nancy Dalva's "Mondays with Merce" series at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York on December 5, 2011. Hopefully the film will become available again in that form.

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⁹ Atlas filmed the first part at Zellerbach Hall at the University of California and the rest in Paris at the Théâtre de la Ville, so the cast changes slightly between the two parts. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/life-stages/>

¹⁰ <http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/>

¹¹ <http://psweb.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/jmueller/dmag.htm>

¹² <http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ad/>