

Tracing Lucinda Childs's Minimalism in the Context of American Postmodern Dance

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"What we were fighting for — especially my generation — is that dance is in and of itself a beautiful thing... It can be just the form itself, as an abstract form, and still be a moving experience, and a human experience." — Lucinda Childs

If the spirit of modern dance is to rebel against the "unnatural and restricted" body in ballet, the empire of American modern dance was already established after the Second World War by pioneers from Isadora Duncan to the generation of modern dancers like Martha Graham. However, as the expression steeped in Greek mythology and psychoanalysis became the politically correct aesthetic in modern dance, the new generation of choreographers once again subverted the paradigms of modern dance. Wearing the label of American postmodern dance, this group of choreographers raised one question: Could the abstract form of dance be a kind of pure art, when dance was stripped of its narrative content and emotional theatricality?

This takes us back to the swinging 1960s when new artistic forms in music, visual arts and film thrived, such as "Happenings", "Events" and the Neo-Dada movement. In 1952, avant-garde composer John Cage staged an improvisational performance at the Black Mountain College in the North Carolina, the US. Featuring visual artist Robert Rauschenberg and postmodern dance master Merce Cunningham, the performance was a pioneering event in experimentation in postmodern dance. A student of Graham, Cunningham opposed the dramatic narrative in Graham's choreography. His choreographic works are abstract and pure, as they are devoid of plot. Any everyday gesture may become dance, and the choreographic order may even be determined by probability. The performance takes place in a multi-focal, multi-directional space on stage. These concepts inspired many artists of American postmodern dance.

In the early 1970s, a group of dancers in New York launched the most important movement in postmodern dance — the Judson Church Theater. These artists studied choreography with Robert Dunn, a student of Cage; they included Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk and others. As their works were rejected by mainstream dance competitions, they gathered at the Judson Church to present their experimental works. A large number of works were staged throughout the year, as the focus of the performance lay in the process rather than the outcome. They were stimulated by the structure in Cunningham's choreography, and influenced by choreographers from the East Coast such as Anna Halprin and Simone Forti. They set out to revolutionise modern dance and to redefine dance.

Rainer proposed the term "postmodern dance". In 1965 she created the famous "No Manifesto", saying "No to spectacle. No to virtuosity. No to transformations and magic and make-believe. No to the glamour and transparency of the star image. No to the heroic. No to the anti-heroic. No to trash imagery. No to involvement of performer or spectator. No to style. No to camp. No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer. No to eccentricity. No to moving or being moved." The manifesto set off an alarm for modern dance. However, the Judson Church Theater lasted just over two years before disbanding. The artists set off to promote their philosophies in different parts of the world, creating a profound impact on

contemporary dance.

Childs was a participant of the Judson Church Theater and a student of Cunningham. After leaving the Judson Church Theater, she founded her own dance company. In 1976, she joined prominent theatre artist Robert Wilson and minimalist composer Philip Glass to create *Einstein on the Beach*, a renowned work in contemporary theatre. Childs's minimalism resembles that of minimalist composers Cage and Glass in the overlapping of basic elements, and the exclusion of personal feeling or dramatic tension. Her choreography is concept and clear structure, as it is precise and abstract like sculpture. Visually it is simple yet abstract, and it is a huge challenge for the dancer's body and memory.

In 1979, Childs teamed up with Glass again to create the minimalist classic *Dance*. In this work, the audience see the dancers respond to the tension of rhythm as they jump, tilt, move forward and spin repetitively through meticulous calculation in the choreography. The dance deepens the visuality of Glass's music. The audience can almost see the ecstatic voice of the soprano, or the sparks of the falling musical notes. Visuals of dance movement by visual artist Sol Lewitt are projected onto the back of the stage, weaving a dialogue with the live dance movement. At some moments the stage seems to morph into parallel universes of multiplying, complex dance visuals, blurring the viewers' perception of space and time. In Childs's minimalism, "Everything was beginning, everything could be reduced to the seemingly simple." Her works illuminate the imaginary position and the grammar of repetition, addition and subtraction; they create a pure charm of dance that leads the audience to focus on the aesthetic of the abstract form of dance, while being enveloped by the lighting, space and music. Such aesthetic is also seen in the early works of famed contemporary Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker from the 1990s, which points to the influence of Childs on contemporary dance.

Translated by Nicolette Wong