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Review/**Dance**

Fleeting Patterns Evoke An Ephemeral World

By JACK ANDERSON

Merce Cunningham has long been fascinated by the curious patterns dancers can make as they pass through space. Therefore it was only appropriate that he should call his newest work "Field and Figures." A choreographically, scenically and musically dense production, it received its New York premiere by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on Tuesday night at the City Center, 131 West 55th Street. Layered with sights and sounds, "Field and Figures" demanded close attention; nevertheless, it proved rewarding to contemplate.

Even its designs, by Kristin Jones

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and Andrew Ginzel, were layered. The backdrop was a scrim curtain horizontally striped in shades of gray. The same shades of gray appeared on the costumes for the 14 dancers in the cast. Behind the scrim, small lights occasionally twinkled like stars. At stage left, a set of motorized red poles kept tilting from side to side. Above the stage, on the right, hung a moon-like disk that brightened and faded during the course of the action. A diamond-shaped object was suspended from it and the moon also cast its shadow on the scrim.

Although what sounded like a marimba and a harmonica could be heard in Ivan Tcherepnin's score, most of the composition consisted of electronically distorted words excerpted from a text by Marcel Duchamp, which commented on the creative act in relation to osmosis and intuition. Yet the layers of sound prevented the complete statement

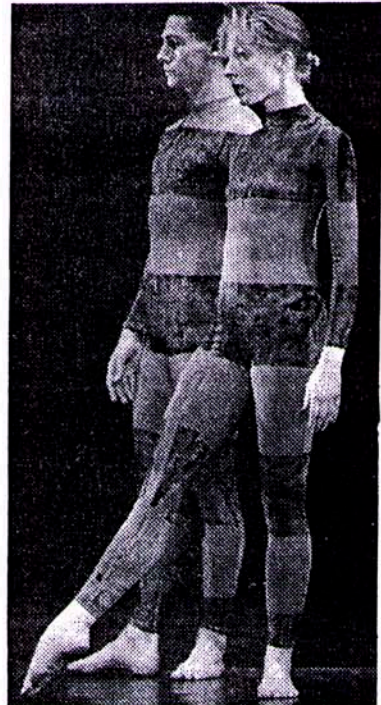
from being comprehensible.

Mr. Cunningham's choreography made shrewd use of his present company. It's a fine one. But, as modern-dance troupes go, it's also a big one, and Mr. Cunningham sometimes treats his present dancers not as individuals but as if they were members of a corps de ballet. If this can disappoint lovers of earlier works by Mr. Cunningham that showed off dancers with vivid stage personalities, it nevertheless demonstrates that he is adept at handling large groups of people. In "Field and Figures," the complexity of his group choreography was dazzling.

Many things happened all at once. The cast was frequently divided into small groups of two, three or four people and several groups did different things at the same time. Clots and clusters would form, only to dissolve almost instantly away. Quickness and slowness were constantly contrasted. Several people would appear to be stuck somewhere on stage, while other people bobbed, darted or whirled around them. What promised to be a passage of runs forward would suddenly reverse itself into a sequence of backward runs. "Field and Figures" acknowledged the essential impermanence of everything in our world, yet never grieved over it. Whenever one pattern faded away, a new one was born.

A crazy quilt of patterns could be seen in "Grange Eve," an ingenious group work of 1986, which received its first performance of the season. Initially, the choreography looked abstract and it was possible to view the entire piece as nothing but a study in design. But anyone who did that would have missed out on much of the fun.

"Grange Eve" soon became a country fair. Its dancers paired off in fragments of square dances and ballroom dances. They strutted with canes, as if rehearsing a number for an amateur variety show. No beverages were visible, but a few staggers suggested these merrymakers were



The New York Times/Keith Meyers

Members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in rehearsal of "Field and Figures."

not teetotalers. There was also a brief fight. Yet peace was soon restored. In some of his recent works, Mr. Cunningham wanders around the stage by himself gazing quizzically upon the action; in "Grange Eve" he was definitely part of the community and acted as if he were very much at home in it.

Takehisa Kosugi's score was filled with clattery noises that sounded like rattling spoons, pots and pans. One could easily believe that a refreshment committee was busy backstage cooking up something tasty for all the country folk who participated in "Grange Eve."

The program also included a fine repeat performance of "Rainforest" with a new cast that consisted of Victoria Finlayson, Larissa McGoldrick, Kristy Santimyer, David Kulick, Dennis O'Connor and Robert Wood. Prowling, slithering and loping about the stage, they could easily have been forest animals. But, of course, they were really dancers making patterns in space. All were proficient and Ms. Santimyer was especially alert.