

Judson Dance Theater – a precursor to postmodern dance

Geta-Violeta RĂVDAN¹

Abstract: *The Judson Dance Theater represented a strong cooperation within the American choreographic vanguard which was initiated in 1962 by various artists: dancers, directors, musicians and plastic artists. Inspired by the innovative methods of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, these brave artists manifested their creativity through experimental workshops held within a Baptist congregation, the Judson Memorial Church of New York, hence the name the artists picked. By rejecting the canons of classical ballet and the forms of modern dance, they unleashed unrepeatable experiments that were characterized by interdisciplinarity.*

Key-words: *postmodernism; dance; interdisciplinarity; performance; performers; workshop; experimental.*

1. Introduction

The tendencies of western theater which were manifest starting with the first half of the 20th century are found within dance as well, through a few temerarious people who were fine observers of contemporary space and body and who, in time, managed to impose new choreographic formulas onto traditional stages and in unconventional spaces. Postmodernism in art comes with diversity, contradictions, a mix of ideas and shapes, as well as the desire to move further than modernism, to exist against it. It is an abstract, confusing phenomenon in formulas which combine elements of multidisciplinary from visual and audio domains which are manifest to the same expressive capacity. Postmodernism in dance came with representations that were characterized by abstract forms of expression, minimal and happening² forms, by exploring the body's numerous possibilities of relating. The notion of postmodernism within dance makes its appearance in America in the 1960s – 1970s, around the Judson Dance Theater. The revolutionary tendency of the Judson group happened in parallel with two other phenomena localized in different parts of the globe: the Butoh dance in Japan³ and Pina Bausch's dance-theater in central Europe.

The Judson Dance Theater represented a strong cooperation of the American choreographic vanguard. It started its activity in the summer of 1962, with a group of young choreographers who presented a dance performance by Robert and Judith Dunn's choreography class in Greenwich Village of New York, inside the Judson Memorial Church.

The Judson Memorial Church was a socially involved Baptist congregation, known for its liberal points of view, and in the '60s, it was the host of the Judson Art Gallery as well as of the Judson Poets' Theater. Robert was a composer and he had also been an accompanist

¹ Doctor in Theater and Performing Arts, ghuncanu@yahoo.com

² In *happening* shows, a series of audio and visual means are combined with the help of corporal, mimics and gestures and spontaneous verbal acts which are not directed but born of the imagination and possibility of the actor (as it comes to pass in performances of *commedia dell'arte*). In trying to meet the spectator's needs, performers will join the spirit to the body in the form of a tacit rebellion against the value system of a consumerist society.

³ *Butoh* or the dance of the darkness (*ankoku buty*) is an artistic movement which appeared between the 1950s and the 1960s in Japan. Unlike fixed models in the nipponic theatric traditions, *Nō* and *Kabuki* respectively, *Butoh* is based on improvisation movements which are delivered with intense, animalic force and refer to a return (intermediated by the body) to existential origins. Its aesthetics is marked by European influences such as expressionism, Antonin Artaud, Jean Genêt and the Japanese puppet theater, *Bunraku*. Its initiator was choreographer and dancer Tatsumi Hijikata along with Kazuo Ohno. Rejected in Japan, the movement will be enthusiastically embraced by Europe, especially France, towards the end of the 20th century.

for Cunningham's dance studio and his wife, Judith, was part of the latter's dance company (between 1959 and 1963). But Robert had better experienced choreographer Merce Cunningham's work method by taking part in an experimental musical theory class held by John Cage in the choreographer's studio of the same building where the Living Theater⁴ was taking place. Between 1960 and 1962, Dunn's workshop is the place where Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Alex Hay, Elaine Summers and Trisha Brown met and collaborated. The Dunns didn't only transmit Cunningham's ideas in their workshops, but also Cage's composition processes (using innovative notation sheet music) in order to encourage the creation of undetermined performances. To that effect, they would read passages of Cage's work, „Silence”, during their class.

The dance performance of the 6th of July 1962, which was free for the public, extended to the duration of a few hours and included 23 dances created by fourteen choreographers. Many of these were members of Cunningham's company or they had only studied in his workshop, but not all of them were trained dancers, but also amateurs and representatives of other disciplines, such as directors, visual artists and composers. Thus, the main characteristic of the group is foreshadowed: interdisciplinarity. This is the moment where the lines between dance, music, theater, visual arts start to fade and where the notion of *performers* (those who perform the action) within a *performance* (term that will replace the name show and which will signify a developing process) first started being used.

In the fall of the same year, the group organized a workshop where they privately presented their choreographies to the critics and a recital was held for the public. Starting with April 1963, the group will be identified by the name of Judson Dance Theater. The workshop would be held weekly, initially in Yvonne Rainer's studio and continuing at the Judson Memorial Church. These experimental composition workshops were real aesthetic adventures in which new choreographic approaches (and not only) were freely tried. It was often hard to distinguish between the choreographer of the represented moment and the other performers. Through the unique and unrepeatable style of these workshops, an audience made of intellectuals and artists is drawn to the Greenwich Village, who will witness the flourishing of a radical experimentation artistic center which would shake the precepts of dance.



Lucinda Childs, *Pastime*, 1963

<http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/asteadypulse/dances/pastime.html>

⁴ *Living Theater* is the oldest group of experimental theater in America, founded in 1947 by actress Judith Malina and painter and poet Julian Beck.

In the following two years, almost 200 choreographies were presented within the Judson Church or other locations. In 1982, Jack Anderson wrote an ample article in the „New York Times” on the influence of the Judson Dance Theater on American modern dance. In his article, the author underscored the existence of two types of choreographies which took place at the Judson: simple dance and extravagant dance.

Simple dance presented the human physique devoid of exaggerations, as a beautiful, unashamed thing. Dance ideas were used by taking everyday movements (from the workplace, pedestrians, games etc.). Creations such as „Parts of Some Sextets” by Y. Rainer (1965), „Rulegame 5” by T. Brown (1964) and „See-Saw” by S. Forti (1960). Also, as J. Anderson notices, at the beginning of these workshops, creations included nudity or semi-nudity, such as Carolee Schneemann’s creation, „Meat Joy” (1964).

As to the use of the extravagant dance, the most notable representative is thought to be James Waring, through his creations which were strongly impregnated by aversion towards classical ballet. „Binghamton Birdie” (1963), „The Seasons” and „Keyboard Pieces” (1964).

After the group’s unofficial split in the summer of 1964, several works were performed by Waring and part of his dancers and also of former members of the initial group (such as Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Elaine Summers, Trisha Brown, Sally Gross, Carolee Schneemann, Yvonne Rainer), as well as the second generation of group members (Meredith Monk, Phoebe Neville and Kenneth King). 1966 is chosen as the final point of the group, because it coincides with the first representation by choreographers Meredith Monk, Kenneth King and Phoebe Neville, who were not members of the original Judson Church group. The truth is, the theatrical works of T. Brown, L. Childs, M. Monk, P. Neville and K. King in the immediately following period, which were impregnated by the idea that spectators are as active as the performers, wouldn’t have been possible without those free experiments at the Judson Church. The choreographers of the late ‘70s and ‘80s were no longer necessarily considered to be part of the vanguard, but they continued within the same radical line as their Judson predecessors.



Schneemann Carolee, *Newspaper Event*, 1963

<http://www.artperformance.org/article-newspaper-event-carolee-schneemann-1963-judson-dance-theatre-111818944.html>

1.1 Relationship with the audience

Despite emotional feelings and internal psychology, part of the Judson choreographers felt vulnerable to the eye of the public, therefore they will explore an aesthetic of indifference, placing their stake on a lack of relation with the public. Both Rainer and Brown appear concerned with the public nature of artistic creations, and the idea that the dancer's privacy is invaded by the eyes of the spectators will cause them to give up on live dance and opt for film instead.

For L. Childs, on the other hand, in „Carnation” (1964), visual contact with the spectators is an invitation of sorts for the latter to identify with the performer, and her cry makes the spectators empathize while at the same time showing the performer's ability to use acting techniques.

Another act of courage as far as the relation with the audience is concerned is later manifest by M. Monk and P. Neville in „Portable” (1966), when their performance will end with the audience placed inside the décor and the performers outside of it. In fact, through this unconventional choice, the two performers wished to break the formalism which caused the public to usually be rigidly separated from performers by the architecture of the venue.

As far as the locations where the workshops presented to the public took place, they contributed to the development of the aesthetics of postmodern dance. By using an unconventional space such as the Judson Church Memorial, they encouraged the usage of various locations which often marked the form of the performance by a different instruction of the body. Because of the collaboration with artists from other domains, various artistic associations happened, while working with amateur artists supported the discovery of new dimensions of movement. This phenomenon encouraged the continuous transformation of the choreographic form and of the vision on the body.

1.2 Movement versus image

Don McDonagh in „The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance”, 1970 (Ramsay 2006, 88), thought that, unlike choreographers in the '50s or '60s, the members of the Judson Dance Theater were more preoccupied by presentation in their creation (the matter of presentation) than by the actual movement (the matter of movement). From the choreographers of the initial group, he thinks D. Gordon, F. Herko, L. Childs and S. Paxton are more preoccupied with the matter of presentation. He will include Alwin Nikolai, Paul Taylor, James Waring, Rudy Perez, Elizabeth Keen, Art Bauman in the same category of choreographers. Of these, only Waring is connected to the Judson Dance Theater, which once again proves the long term influence the Judson phenomenon had.

In 2012, George Jackson briefly described a few of the personalities of the Judson Dance Theater group in an article in the „Dance Heritage Coalition” (2012, 2):

„Unquestionably distinct were the physicality and personality of prominent individuals in the group. Judith Dunn, who oversaw JDT rehearsals and gave classes, impressed as a dancer-choreographer of staunch build, technical fortitude (Martha Graham-derived plus Cunningham modern) and stern personality (while married to Robert Dunn, but loosening up after they separated). Yvonne Rainer radiated clarity and generosity. Gracious while bold, Rainer's contours and behavior seemed chiseled - like those of movie star Marlene Dietrich, but her locks were brunette and not blonde. Steve Paxton had an eager edge; he was the all-American boy with pliant strength. Robert Morris seemed combative and was guarded. Lucinda Childs and Elaine Summers were womanly, with Childs neat and a little shy whereas Summers was cozier. Deborah Hay shifted thoughtfully between the formal and the casual. Trisha Brown boldly tackled reality's rules by walking on walls, trying to disregard gravity and playing with perspective. Aileen Passloff bounced like a ball; she was resilient, protective, motherly and yet balletic. Other participants included Alex Hay of the accurate athleticism, inquisitive Jill Johnston, satisfied Robert Rauschenberg, quizzical Remy

Charlip, James Waring of the lean-and-hungry ballet look, faun-like Fred Herko, and sensual Simone Forti (Morris).”

In „Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces” (2006, 112), B. Ramsey states that the new alternatives of expression of this new dance were oriented towards personal, individual experiences of the performers, which contravened social norms. These works followed a liberal social line, much more so than the works of the time in modern dance and ballet.

The Judson Dance Theater became a phenomenon known through journalists which increased its reputation by various articles written from the perspective of internal observers: Jill Johnston in „The Village Voice” and Allen Hughes in the „New York Time”. Subsequently, part of the initial members of the Judson Dance Theater wrote about their own works: T. Brown, S. Paxton, Y. Raider, L. Childs, and D. Gordon.

1.3 Physicality – painting

The similarities between physicality and painting were explored mainly by Simone Forti and Carolee Schneemann. The latter was the first plastic artist involved in the Judson Dance Theater workshops. In her first creation, „Newspaper Event” (1963), she treated her collaborators as a paint that built images on the performance area. Space, to her, represented a canvas that was made for being painted on. Because of movements in the horizontal and vertical plane by which the performers interacted, Schneemann said in a 2000 interview to Ramsey Bart in New Palz that this creation anticipated the emergence of S. Paxton’s *contact improvisation* a decade later.

1.4 Links to pop-art. Objects in choreographies

There are objects that appear in the works of pop artists of the time, which are also found in the creations of the Judson Dance Theater. These are regular, made objects with which the artists move, thus developing new ways of performing and of keeping the presence of the performers more low-key in the entire performance. They discovered new ways of connecting materials and used objects and thus the conceptual idea moved ahead of the quality of movement. By manipulating household objects, Lucinda Childs proves, once again, in „Carnation”, that anything can become dance. S. Paxton himself uses various objects in „Flat”: chair, clothes, shoes, and C. Schneemann shocks in „Eye Body” (1963) not only by the colored nudity, but also by using ropes, polyethylene and other materials through which she inserts various parts of her body. By using hooks, sponges, sheets, chairs, clothes, a hair curler, ropes, canvases etc., they redefine the relations between humans and objects.

1.5 Nudity in relation to the socio-political situation

Since they chose to work in a minimalistic manner, many of their creations purposely showed a lack of depth and a triviality as far as the everyday city life was concerned, superficiality and sensuality which unrestrainedly tackled sexual and gender norms. Although Judson artists declared themselves as apolitical, some observers of the time made correlations between their creations and the socio-political situation. In the contexts of protests against the Vietnam War, B. Ramsay wrote in his work, „Judson Dance Theater Performative Traces” (2006, 124), that the presence of nudity in the Judson creations could be correlated with the slogan at that time: „Make love not war”. And that nudity also hinted to Wilhelm Reich’s popular work at that time on the psychology of fascism („The Mass Psychology of Fascism”, 1933), which spoke of sexual repressions and fascist impotence.

With strong feminist ideas, C. Schneemann appears nude in various artistic events, but only in „Eye Body” (1963) does she appear so in a creation of her own. Naked and body painted, her face included, she creates within an exhibition of plastic art works a subtle combination between artistic and visual performance.



Carolee Schneemann în *Eye Body*, 1963
<https://www.tollebild.com/bilden/eye-body-3b.html>

If Monk's nude appearance at the end of the „16 Millimeter Earrings” (1966) creation was in a metonymical relation (as B. Ramsey says) with ideologies related to political and sexual freedom, Rainer's skinny body was in a metonymical relation with the wounds inflicted upon war veterans. A more poignant connection to social events is the performance (of the same creation) held the following year at the Hunter College during „Angry Arts Week”, where a series of concerts and artistic events took place, protesting against the war in Vietnam.

2. Propagation of interdisciplinarity

The initial Judson Dance Theater group with its artistic innovations opened the path towards the interdisciplinarity which will make itself more and more present in dance shows after the beginnings of the Judson Dance Theater. In his attempt to obtain a synthetic alternative in the very conventional practice of occidental theater, starting with 1966, M. Monk combines singing, dancing and film projections in his works, thus breaking the boundaries between these different forms of art and maintaining the magic of theater. By introducing new forms which were different from the ones already existing within occidental theater, such as forms of Japanese theater (Kabuki), Indian theater (Kathakali) and Chinese opera, he tries to explore the drama – music – dance triangle. This interdisciplinary approach in which images and conceptual ideas primed over ideas connected to movement was also found in the creations of Robert Morris and Simone Forti.

Although Cunningham's contribution to the emergence of postmodern dance cannot be contested, artists, through their experimental dances at the Judson Dance Theater, showed a new beginning and a new world of dance, through which they expanded the possibilities of contemporary dance. They contributed to a radical development of other arts and of the interdependence between dance and the other arts. These American innovators associated the body with the headquarters of a resistance directed against conservative ideological constraints and against consumerism. The main characteristics of the Judson Dance Theater phenomenon were:

- it rejected existing conventions within ballet and modern dance;
- it favored research and experimenting;

- it encouraged experimenting in all artistic areas;
- it rejected the boundaries between different fields;
- it developed and favored a new restriction-free aesthetic;
- it adopted a progressive detachment from the traditional bonds between the technique of movement and its aesthetic value;
- it came with a new theory of dance, redefining it;
- it relied on improvisation and spontaneous determination;
- it borrowed Cunningham's and Cage's hazard and random processes;
- like Cunningham's dancers, the group's artists embraced an absent manner of performing, through lack of involvement;
- it sustained the process of repetition in compositions;
- it favored the appearance of choreographic themes and styles;
- it gave greater importance to the significations of the artistic act and less importance to movements;
- it transformed unconventional places where they presented their works into their actual performance;
- it discovered new methods of collaboration with musicians and designers
- it used the term of performers, which doesn't necessarily refer to dancers;
- the group's artists perceive dance not only as a dancer's activity, but also that of a composer/ musician, visual artist or even average person.

3. JDT – a precursor to postmodernism in dance

Y. Rainer's „The mind is a muscle” (1968) is a reference title for postmodernism. Within three simultaneous solos, he uses everyday life actions specific to the Judson Dance Theater, such as walking, sitting, eating, drinking, getting dressed.

In „Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance”, 1987 (Ramsay 2006, 141), Sally Banes states that postmodern dance was a particularly American phenomenon. She will distinguish between three phases of postmodernism in dance: *the initial phase of detachment* (1961 – 1968); *the transition phase* (1968 – 1973); *the consolidation phase* with three distinct approaches: analytical, metaphysical and metaphorical. In order to prove her theory, Banes will analyze three performances which, though not created in America, support her theories while at the same time underscoring the influence that the Judson Dance Theater had on new generations of choreographers all around the world.



Trisha Brown & Steve Paxton in *Lightfall*, 1963
<http://www.artbook.com/blog-judson.html>

Thus, T. Brawn's „Accumulation with Talking plus Watermotor” (1985) would be included in the category of analytical postmodern dance, P. Bausch's „Caff  Muller” (1978) would fall under the category of metaphorical and metaphysical postmodern dance and A. T. de Keersmaeker's „Rosas Danst Rosas” (1983) would include all three, analytical, metaphorical and metaphysical dance. Banes' characteristics related to analytical postmodern dance can be distinguished in America as well, in creations of the '60's, such as Y. Rainer's „Trio A” and S. Paxton's „Flat”.

After 1996, when the initial Judson Dance Theater starts to dissolve, the creations of M. Monk, K. King and P. Neville (who are seen as second-generation Judson choreographers) also exemplify Banes' theories. And in many of the creations of the '70s, Banes will once again find the postmodern metaphor and metaphysic. It is observed that the new aesthetics will go from the characteristic metaphor of the expressive modern dance to the metonymy of the vanguard dance of the early '60s, from symbolism to allegory. If the metaphors of already existent performances included a direct, transparent relationship between the significant and the signified, the metonymy within Judson's creations is based on illusion, allegory and associations, through which connections between the fragmentary or complex actions of everyday contemporary life are sought.

Three characteristics of postmodern dance which were born in the permissive environment of the Judson Dance Theater and which currently influence the world of dance are emphasized in „International Encyclopedia of Dance”, vol. 4, (2004, 635):

- ✓ the study of the theory of dance seen as an innovative modern art, by choreographers Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and Robert Morris;
- ✓ the theatrical, often humorous style (such as Judith Dunn's, Philip Corner's and Elaine Summers' creations);
- ✓ the use of multimedia (through the contributions of Judith Dunn, Philip Corner and Elaine Summers).

4. Conclusions

What is still left of the Judson aesthetics nowadays?

- The usage of pedestrian actions, games and specific everyday actions in theater-dance representations and in modern dance, which were seen as non-dance at the time;
- Dance seen as a process in itself, performing purposeless movements, without trying to build a role or a defined character;
- It strongly influenced the experimental dance of the '70s and '80s which will be based on ideas and strategies used in the '60s by artists of the Judson Dance Theater;
- The usage of easily noticeable repetition by T. Brown, which is later found in Pina Bausch's and A. T. de Keersmaeker's creations.

One cannot deny the influences that the Judson Dance Church benefitted from that were coming from vanguard artists of the '50s (Cunningham with composer Cage, James Waring, Simone Forti, Anna Halprin), from happening and artistic movements such as Fluxus⁵. But with all of these influences, the people involved followed their own creative ideas, in workshops that investigated new artistic possibilities and corporal manifestations. From the desire to explore new subjects and experiences, this new dance strongly shook the conventions and traditions of dance at the time and the Judson Dance Theater leaves an

⁵ *Fluxus* is a vanguard movement connected to happening, which appeared at the beginning of the 1960s. From the desire to integrate life within art, they express the ever-living character of reality by alternative endeavors within visual arts, music and literature.

inheritance for the choreographers of the last decades of the 20th century based on detachment from expressive choreographic models of the past and on placing the accent on corporal materiality.

The main conclusion is that the discoveries of associate artists of the Judson Dance Theater had a great influence on experimental dance on both sides of the Atlantic and they continue to influence young generations of choreographers.

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