

Conceptual libretto for *Musings*

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This text is not written in order to tell the spectator what to think or understand about *Musings*. I consider the viewpoint of each spectator as valid as my own and I can only encourage the audience to feel free to interpret it however they want. This conceptual libretto is addressed to the curious who might appreciate my own viewpoint, as well as to the dance professional (dancer, choreographer, journalist, critic, presenter, sponsor) who is curious know what inspired me to make this work, as well as the concepts behind it.

But it is by no mean a dictatum. You might want to read this after having seen the piece, keeping your interpretation free of anything I might say.

The Titlings

The word "musing" presupposes several semantic directions, and I want them all. As a name, it offers the following connotations: "daydreaming," hence the dreamlike aspect of the lighting as well as the piece as a whole, since it proposes a succession of five dreamlike moments; "meditation," in connection with Zen Buddhism, dear to John Cage and Merce Cunningham; "reflection" on the work of Merce and John, but also of Robert Rauschenberg; "introspection," since several elements of the piece are inspired by personal events; and "study," as in "literary study" on an artistic opus, here the legacy of Merce and John - or as in "musical study" implying exercise and discipline - or as in "painting study" implying that this work is preparatory for later developments and works (I will certainly develop certain themes tackled in this piece) - and finally "study" because I am an eternal student of Merce and John.

I wanted a clear title for the piece: *Musings, A Solitary Duet*. But the program for the show allows me to develop the title and be more precise. It also allows me to be freer and more imaginative, since I want to consider the program notes as an introduction to the fantasy world of this dance. Hence *Musings re Merce, John and Bob*, which graphically reflects on the degree of tribute to one or the other: Merce is written in a bigger font than John, which is written bigger than Bob.

Following this enhanced title there is a series of subtitles and nominal precisions. Theatrical meditations by Foofwa d'Imobilité in homage to Merce Cunningham, indicates that I consider this not only as a choreography but as a work of art including the visual (costuming and the traces left on the ground), text, music as well as dance.

... Possibly giving the title "Cage a cappella" to the music and "Close to Rauschenberg's skin" to the costume is a playful way to create a kind of secret information. Solitary duet interpreted by Foofwa dit Mobilité gives the notion of a solo that was supposed to be a duet danced by a variation of my name (in French "d'immobilité" means "of stillness" and "dit Mobilité" means "known as Mobility"), as a way to play with the dichotomy of the dancer-choreographer.

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Solitary Duet

But this piece is a solitary duet because the project was initiated as a dance duet with ex-partner in life and onstage, Banu Ogan. Merce's death also strengthened the choice to suggest absence in the work, the notion of a duet that became a solo, or a solo desiring a duality. This presence of an absence is choreographically exemplified by the duet with an imaginary partner in the first section; by the dialectic dynamic between the Graham movements and the classical ballet's vocabulary; by the dichotomy between movements and singing in the third; by the imaginary conversation between Merce and John in the fifth section. And in the piece as a whole, one can say that the real duet is the one between the lights and the dancer onstage.

Structure

The structure of *Musings* is inspired by the garden of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, where I went twelve years ago. This garden, dear to John Cage - it inspired several of his musical pieces - consists of carefully raked gravel covered by fifteen stones surrounded by moss in 5 groups of 2, 2, 3, 3, and 5 stones. That's the reason there are five sections in *Musings*, each section's time determined by a multiple of 2, 3, or 5, each separated by a moment of darkness with nothing happening.

General Concept

I wish the tone of *Musings* to be an homage, in order to share my admiration of Merce's work, to "pay my respects." But to think about Merce's work implies John Cage of course, and to some extent Robert Rauschenberg. These three artists all passed away and are tagged as the three of the most important collaborators for the theater of the second half of the XXth century. I like to think of them as the three princes of Serendip, the princes of the unexpected discoveries.

However, I wanted the piece to be vivifying rather than dismal. It is, above all, a reflection on their work and my purpose was to evoke some of their pieces by adding a variation which could renew their radical ideas, ever so slightly. So this becomes not quotation but a creative and living legacy in some ways.

Quotations

The piece has hundreds of references yet I did in a way that if a spectator doesn't know anything about Merce's or John Cage's or Robert Rauschenberg's work, s/he still can enjoy the spectacle.

But again, I quote, I paraphrase and I imitate throughout the piece which can bring up the question of copyrights and ownership of previous work, especially of such recognized artists. I always thought that it should be possible to quote a bit of somebody else's work as any philosopher quotes others, for example. This is obviously not about selling a

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Cunningham piece or making money out of it; it's about the same gratuitous generosity of any honest artistic endeavor: vivify the culture of our societies.

But if one looks carefully, there is never a straight quotation. Either there is another element that makes it a conglomeration of others, or there is a change from the original that makes it a paraphrase, a reappropriation of material rather than a copy. Note also that in the fifth section, imitation is used as a way to bring the spirits of the dead, make them alive through another body.

Costume

Robert Rauschenberg created one of his first Combine paintings for the set of *Minutiae*, a choreography by Merce in 1951. Since the visual artists invited by Merce were sometimes painting the costumes, I decided to imitate the same kinds of Combine techniques: paint strokes, colors and combined material such as newspaper cuts. I vary the original by painting directly on my skin; hence the play on words: Close to Rauschenberg's skin.

By the same token, I wanted to evoke the Cunningham unitards. I thus stopped the painting where the unitards are cut: at the wrists, ankles and neck, therefore creating a sort of trompe-l'oeil: it looks like I am wearing a unitard but there is actually none.

At the same time, I wanted to evoke the big action paintings of the 50's by leaving traces with the body paint white stage, as canvas. And the degradation of the costume as the piece goes on suggests a kind of degeneration which is implicit when one talks about dead artists.

The Music

If Merce and John worked the choreography and the musical composition separately and married both only in the first performance of a new work, it was a necessity for this piece to do similarly. And as *Musings* is a solo, I wanted a music without instrument. I opted to use a cappella voice. Every section of *Musings* is a vocal rendition of instrumental compositions of John Cage; hence the musical title here: Cage A Cappella. But it is in no way a parody. I try to reproduce the music as best as I can, even though the means are rather poor: I am not a musician and the voice offers only certain possibilities.

I also think of this vocal reproduction as the ultimate trace of a piece of music: what remains when all that is left is memory, and a voice to return to the past.

In *Musings*, both choreography and music are gathered and combined in the same body - producing movement and sound. Here you have a unification and corporeal actualization of the synergy dear to Merce and John.

Cage's works reproduced a cappella are in the chronological order of their composition. For the first section: "The Unavailable Memory Of," for prepared piano, work of the forties.

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I also liked the title linked with the idea of absence which haunts *Musings*. The second section tries to reproduce some of the first movement of the first work composed by chance procedures, *The Music of Changes*. In the third section, I paraphrase some of the songs in *Apartment House 1776*, work in celebration for the bicentenary for the Constitution of the United States of America, composed in 1976. I rewrote the songs to suggest a kind of canonization of Merce, while keeping the melody and certain words of the originals. The fourth section, reproduced by the whistling notes held in the so called "number pieces" of the nineties, *One*. The last section is an imitation of the voices of John Cage and Merce Cunningham and some of their statements.

The Choreography

I made many choreographic decisions by rolling a die, which I never do in my other pieces. But it seemed to make sense to use chance in a piece about Merce and John.

Every section is a reflection on the work of Merce. The first one is inspired by some Fred Astair with a mix of some of Merce's moves, because Merce began dance with soft shoe and vaudeville. He often kept this underlying gentlemanly dance form in his duets, even when the forms were more fragmented. This is also an occasion to show the pure joy of dancing present in some of Merce's dances.

The second section is a dialectic between Graham's moves and the classical ballet vocabulary, because it is these two dance elements that Merce composed with when he developed his first choreographies and his training. In this section I wanted the two styles to be as raw as possible and to see a certain kind of experimenting in combining the two, as in the first faltering steps in a new research.

The third section quotes a Cunningham technique class, from its first back exercises to the last balance of the lesson, through leg exercises, combinations of back and leg together, adagios, triplettes, turns and jumps. It's sort of an alphabet book and preservation work. At a time when the survival of the Cunningham studio and the technique taught there are in question, I wanted the exercises to appear and disappear in a sort of "Phoenix-choreography" to show the precariousness of the whole thing.

I think of the fourth section "the butterfly effect" since some of the aspects of the dance are totally left to chance, in the moment they're done. What is determined are the positions taken out of the solo Merce choreographed from me in 1992 in *Enter*. But I leave the destiny of the phrase to be decided by the loss of balance in each situation. In other words, every time I dance this section the phrase follows a different course and a different time. Therefore the itinerary, the spacing, the directions of the body, the timing of the passage from one position to another are placed in the hands of chance and the precarity of the loss of balance.

The fifth section is a kind of dialogue between statements by John Cage with actions and statements by Merce, with some of the dances he made for himself. The stop-watch is present in the same way it structures the time in some of John's pieces. I place all in all fifteen groups of objects in the configuration of the Ryoan-ji stones. Each object is reference to Cage's life or work: dice, a coin and the *I Ching* book (for the use of chance

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procedures); an audio cassette, compact disks and an audio tape (for the evolution of musical means); a tie (that I cut as Nam-June Paik did to John once); and finally pieces of wood, bolts and other objects that are usually inserted to prepare a piano. The grey balloons quote the silver pillows of Warhol in *Rainforest*, a choreography from 1968. They are then thrown at the public, as an exemplification of dance and music being everywhere around us and a metaphor of the passage of work of art from the stage to society.

At the beginning of this piece, I imitate Merce when, at the beginning of each rehearsal he would say: "Position, ready and curtain" and start his stop-watch. At the end of *Musings*, I give the timing of his life (90 years, 3 months, 10 days, etc.) almost to the second and I quote him too when we would end a run-through (taking this time my own voice): "and curtain!" The curtain of lights goes off. End.

Foofwa d'Imobilité