



Lord of the chance

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY

What: "Split Sides," "Views on Stage," "Fabrications"

Where: Ahmanson Theatre

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$20 to \$55

Information: (213) 972-0711

Merce Cunningham keeps audiences guessing with his innovative approach to choreography

**By Vicki Smith Paluch
Correspondent**

Merce Cunningham's investigations of modern dance and chance theory are legendary. For more than 50 years, the choreographer has used "chance operations" such as coin tosses, the I Ching and computers to challenge and inspire him.

So, it is not surprising that when the Merce Cunningham Dance Company performs "Split Sides" at the Ahmanson Theatre Thursday through Sunday, the order of his 40-minute dance to the alternative rock music of Radiohead and Sigur Ros will be decided by the roll of dice. "We don't know who will be rolling the dice, but I'm sure the people at Dance at the Music Center will select someone interesting," Cunningham said during a recent telephone interview from his studio in New York.

"Sides" features decors by photographers Catherine Yass and Robert Heishman, costumes by James Hall and lighting by James F. Ingalls. The choreography and each collaborative element have been created in two distinct parts. The audience will see the most tangible use of chance operations of any of the 200-plus works in the Cunningham repertoire. The order of each of the two sets of music compositions, decors, costumes and lighting plots will be set by a public role of the dice on stage preceding the performance. Because "Split Sides" has two distinct parts, "You never know which one of the 32 possibilities you'll get," he said.

Cunningham began his experiments with chance operations in the 1950s, a time when the I Ching was first translated into English. This Chinese work relies on the casting of yarrow sticks or coins to generate its divinatory hexagrams, in which there are 64 possibilities.

"It brings up possibilities I might not find otherwise," said Cunningham. It also brings forth complexity, which is what Cunningham is all about. Cunningham creates his dances on the "what if" theory. One of his most famous explorations was that of independent collaboration, meaning he choreographed his dances while his music, decor, costume and lighting directors created their own elements, unveiling the final version a day before performance.

Renowned for his collaboration with avant-garde composers and artists, Cunningham's first music director was John Cage, who remained associated with the company until his death in 1992, and the company's first resident designer was Robert Rauschenberg, who served from 1954-64.

Jasper Johns succeeded Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella, Andy Warhol and Robert Morris worked with the company during the '60s. Dove Bradshaw is the current artistic adviser, serving since 1984.

"Split Sides' is the first Cunningham work to use rock music. "Radiohead mentioned the music of John Cage, and that made us wonder," recalled Cunningham. "Radiohead was attracted to Cage's use of outside sounds, what some people call noise. We decided it was possible, then we brought in Sigur Ros."

The company also will perform "Views on Stage," created last year with music by John Cage, decor by Ernesto Neto, costumes by James Hall and lighting by Josh Johnson, Thursday and Friday. "Fabrications' (1987), with music by Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta, decor and costumes by Bradshaw and lighting by Johnson, will be performed Saturday and Sunday.

In "Views on Stage," Cunningham wondered what would happen if, at some point, all the men executed the same moves, but each dancer was positioned in such a way as to show each movement from a different vantage point.

"It's not a new idea; it's quite common in Picasso, where you are seeing it from different angles simultaneously," Cunningham explained.

With filmmaker Charles Atlas, Cunningham is creating a video dance of "Views," which will be screened at REDCAT on Wednesday, as part of Dance Camera West. In the video, the camera adds another layer of angles. Cunningham was one of the first choreographers to embrace collaboration of video and dance. In "Fabrications' (1987), Cunningham explored the arena of transitions in movement, those steps that are the connective tissue in any dance. In this full-company piece, the movement changes as the rhythms change for various groups of dancers. Because several things are happening at once, the transition cannot be seen.

"When we watch television, several things are going on at once, and the viewer makes choices of what to see. In this piece, the viewer looks and listens. I am not trying to refer to anything else. What you see is what it is," said Cunningham.

That statement sounds simple, but it's the complexity of choreographing the phrasing, groupings and transitions to create a magical illusion that interests Cunningham.

"I have always had to work at something that is new to me," he said.

— Vicki Smith Paluch is an Altadena freelance writer.