

Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done

Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, and Steve Paxton reflect on Robert Ellis Dunn and Judith Dunn's composition class

YVONNE RAINER: My name is Yvonne Rainer.

SIMONE FORTI: I'm Simone Forti.

STEVE PAXTON: My name is Steve Paxton. I'm a dancer.

RAINER: Choreographer.

FORTI: Artist.

RAINER: Writer. Filmmaker.

FORTI: I've mainly worked with movement.

PAXTON: I came from Arizona with my banjo on my knee about 1958.

RAINER: I felt I'd come into dance pretty late, so I was in a hurry in 1960. I mean, absorbing everything, and that included ballet. It included Cunningham, it included Waring and Cage.

PAXTON: The modern dance world was not homogeneous. I mean, it wasn't all just one big thing. There were a lot of different aesthetics and dance approaches in it.

FORTI: When Bob Dunn offered his composition class, it was like something solid to work with.

RAINER: I enrolled in Robert Dunn's composition class in the fall of 1960. At that point there were only five of us. And Bob rolled out these scores for John Cage's *Fontana Mix* and started talking about ways that score might be adapted for choreographic purposes.

FORTI: I remember the scores themselves, transferring into movement rather than sound.

RAINER: I was looking for some other way to look at things. I mean, painters were defying all the rules already and Cage came along and introduced a whole new vocabulary of sounds and movements.

PAXTON: Chance methods meant that instead of trying to imagine a new way to do something, you just set out using dice, coins to decide what part of the body to use or entrances and exits and length durations. I mean, you can think of a million ways to use that kind of procedure.

FORTI: It wasn't that we stayed with John Cage's ways of making scores, but we made the leap to "What are we going to invent?"

RAINER: That was another thing that was interesting: you didn't judge yourself—whatever happened in that class was acceptable.

RAINER: We looked out the window for possible movement ideas; people walking in the streets. One of the assignments was to do something ordinary. I remember what I did. We were all at one end of the studio. I got up and walked to the other end while unbuttoning my sweater. Steve Paxton sat on a bench and ate a sandwich. And Simone either brought in a sprouted onion or described what had happened when this onion had sprouted and toppled over.

FORTI: [*laughs*] I thought it was beautiful so I set it on a bottle next to my bed, and then it fell off.

RAINER: And that was her response—something ordinary that happened. This came directly from Cage of course, everyday sounds.

PAXTON: It wasn't a matter of learning to make a dance, but it was a matter of learning to make a new aesthetic.

RAINER: Bob Dunn, bless his soul. There was something so exciting about that moment, you know? Those first three months, how important Cage was, how important this convergence of like-minded people was.