Merce Cunningham's Legacy: Influences on Contemporary Dance Practices

by Ana Arledge

Once considered radical, American choreographer Merce Cunningham redefined modern dance by prioritizing abstraction, separating music from movement, and embracing chance-based compositional structures. His emphasis on clarity, strength, and flexibility in the body, combined with directional shifts, rhythmic complexity, and spatial independence, sparked postmodern trends that challenged traditional dance conventions. Since Cunningham's death in 2009 and the disbandment of his company in 2011, his legacy has been preserved through the Merce Cunningham Trust, which licenses instructors and curates the Dance Capsules, a digital archive encompassing 86 works from 1942 to 2009. However, without direct access to Cunningham himself, transmission of the technique now relies on interpretation by second- and third-generation artists.

This thesis investigates how Cunningham's pedagogical and choreographic methods endure and transform when interpreted by contemporary choreographers. Through embodied research, archival study, and choreographic experimentation, I examine how Kyle Abraham, Liz Gerring, and John Scott engage with Cunningham's legacy in their own creative processes. These artists—recognized for their distinct voices and access to the Trust—represent a privileged intersection between preservation and reinterpretation, raising critical questions about authorship, influence, and innovation in dance lineage.

Personal engagement included sustained training in the Cunningham Technique, access to archival materials provided by the Trust, and firsthand experience performing two restaged works, *Scramble* (1967) and *Signals* (1970), staged by former Cunningham Company member Silas Riener. In response, I choreographed an original work, *Pentaxis*, performed by five students from the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. These performances demonstrate how Cunningham's principles continue to inform contemporary choreographic practice while also allowing for personal and aesthetic reinterpretation. This project offers a critical contribution to the ongoing dialogue about how legacy in contemporary practice is maintained, not through replication alone, but through generative artistic inquiry and innovation.

Introduction

As Merce Cunningham once wrote, "My work has always been in process. I do not think of each dance as an object, rather a short stop on the way".[1] This thesis extends that sentiment by exploring how his influence evolves through the creative processes of today's choreographers. Kyle Abraham, Liz Gerring, and John Scott are all highly respected artists with established careers, recognized for their distinct voices and contributions to contemporary dance. Their opportunities to engage directly with Cunningham's legacy through commissions from the Merce Cunningham Trust or curated programming reflect a unique level of artistic privilege and access.[2] Their "stops" in Cunningham technique represent not only a continuation of his ideas but also a moment to critically and creatively reflect on what it means to inherit and reinterpret a modernist canon. As well-established choreographers with access to the Merce Cunningham Trust and its resources, Abraham, Gerring, and Scott occupy a unique position of privilege—one that allows them to engage deeply with Cunningham's legacy while also challenging and reshaping it through their own artistic values, identities, and choreographic voices. My research combines physical training in Cunningham technique, archival study, and choreographic

[1] *About Merce Cunningham*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2025)

[2] *In Conversation with Merce (with BAC)*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2021)

experimentation to investigate how this legacy is reshaped when passed through different generations, bodies, and sociopolitical environments. Through embodied exploration of the relationship between Cunningham's technique and contemporary creations, I ask: How do choreographers build upon Cunningham's innovations while preserving his artistic influence?

Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) was a groundbreaking choreographer who redefined modern dance by rejecting narrative, separating movement from music, and embracing non-linear structures in choreography.[3] Originally dancing for the Martha Graham Dance Company for six years, Cunningham was known as a multifaceted artist throughout his career working as a choreographer, collaborator, chance taker, innovator, film producer, and teacher. His technique is known for its physicality in both the body and mind along with trademarked exercises that involve torso and legwork, spatial awareness, and a variety of rhythmic patterns.[4]

After founding the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953, he created more than 190 dances and over 700 Events, establishing a rigorous and distinctive movement vocabulary rooted in abstraction, technical precision, and chance.[5] His principles, such as the "refusal to meaning," the independence of music and dance, and the body as a vehicle for abstract expression, continue to shape contemporary choreography and have deeply influenced my own creative process.[6] Before his death, Merce Cunningham developed a comprehensive Legacy Plan to preserve his technique and repertoire, guide the company through its final performances, and support dancers as they transitioned beyond the company.[7] After the company officially disbanded in 2011, the Legacy Plan was enacted to ensure the long-term preservation of his artistic contributions.[8]

[3] *About Merce Cunningham*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2025)

[4] *Cunningham Technique*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2025)

[5] *About Merce Cunningham*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2025)

[6] *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary*, Page 8, Carrie Noland (2020)

[7] *Legacy Plan*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2008)

[8] Town, Country, and the Schoolyard, *The Brooklyn Rail* (2017)

Yet even with this structure in place, questions remain about how to honor Cunningham's work while allowing space for contemporary artists to reinterpret his methods through new creative and cultural lenses.

Preserving Cunningham's legacy requires both fidelity to his choreographic principles and innovation within new cultural and aesthetic contexts. Through the work of Abraham, Gerring, and Scott, I examine how contemporary choreographers adapt Cunningham's methods—such as chance operations, decentralization of the stage, and technical precision, while incorporating their own values and artistic identities.

The practice-based component of my thesis builds upon observations and conversations initiated during my internship at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, where I engaged with Patricia Lent of the Merce Cunningham Trust and attended *Three Duets*—a program that featured Abraham and Gerring's choreographic responses to Cunningham (see Appendix A).

By situating Cunningham's influence alongside the choreographic responses of Abraham, Gerring, and Scott, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand how lineage and legacy operate in contemporary dance.[9] It emphasizes the role of emerging and established artists in shaping what it means to carry forward a modern dance technique into the future. Supported by the Luther Rice Undergraduate Research Fellowship and the Enosinian Scholars Program, this exploration is an interdisciplinary investigation of how legacy is maintained not through replication, but through critical and creative engagement.

Research on Choreographic Responses

Honoring Merce Cunningham's legacy requires both preservation and innovation. I examined how contemporary choreographers reinterpret Cunningham's methods by balancing faithful reconstruction of his technique with the integration of new aesthetic approaches and choreographic structures. Considering how his foundational principles, such as abstraction, chance operations, and the independence of music and movement, are adapted, we reflect upon the evolving artistic values and practices.

[9] *Cunningham: Change, a Legacy Continues*, Mandy Salva Montclair State University (2024)

This section argues that contemporary choreographers are not simply preserving Merce Cunningham's legacy; they are actively transforming it by integrating his formal techniques with their own artistic voices, cultural contexts, and narrative strategies. The works of Kyle Abraham, Liz Gerring, and John Scott exemplify this dual commitment to both continuity and innovation.

The program *Three Duets*, presented as *In Conversation with Merce Cunningham*, featured choreographic responses by Liz Gerring (*Dialogue*) and Kyle Abraham (*MotorRover*), alongside a re-staging of Cunningham's own *Landrover* (1972), arranged by former company member Jamie Scott.[10] Originally produced as a digital program in 2021 by the Merce Cunningham Trust and the Baryshnikov Arts Center, these works illustrate how choreographers are reinterpreting Cunningham's aesthetic through distinct contemporary lenses.[11]

Gerring's *Dialogue* preserves Cunningham's formal rigor and spatial clarity while subtly shifting the emotional tone and timing, suggesting a meditative and process-oriented engagement.[12] In contrast, Abraham's *MotorRover*, created for A.I.M., fuses Cunningham's movement vocabulary with the fluid expressivity and social consciousness characteristic of Abraham's choreographic voice.[13] His response infuses the structure of Cunningham technique with lived experience and a blend of Black dance, postmodern movement, and ballet, challenging the notion that Cunningham's work must remain abstract or apolitical.[14]

John Scott's *Begin Anywhere* (2025), performed alongside four Cunningham solos, offers another interpretive mode (see Appendix A). The work incorporates Cunningham's signature techniques—chance operations, twisting and tilting movement, and non-linear dancer relationships—while creating a piece that feels expansive, unpredictable, and driven by spontaneous group dynamics. Scott does not replicate Cunningham's methods; rather, he channels them to generate a choreographic environment that feels current and exploratory.[15]

These examples demonstrate that Cunningham's influence continues to inspire a wide spectrum of responses. Rather than reproducing his works, these choreographers engage with his ideas as tools for constructing new aesthetic and narrative frameworks. They extend his legacy by incorporating individual identities, lived experiences, and contemporary questions of representation—elements that Cunningham himself often avoided. This shift indicates a recontextualization of postmodern dance values within today's social and cultural climate.

My own choreographic work draws from this lineage. In my Scholar Artist Showing, I performed *Scramble* (1967) and *Signals* (1970), staged by Silas Riener and licensed by the Merce Cunningham Trust, alongside an original in-progress response titled *Pentaxis* (see Appendix B). Like the artists above, I used Cunningham's techniques not as fixed rules, but as a generative framework through which to explore my own questions about form, structure, and relationships in the studio space.

Kyle Abraham, *MotorRover* (2021)

Kyle Abraham exemplifies how contemporary choreographers can blend Cunningham's core principles with their own unique movement vocabularies, artistic identities, and choreographic goals. He adapts Cunningham technique through a broader physical language rooted in hip hop, contemporary, and social dance, creating work that is both technically precise and emotionally expressive. Introduced to Cunningham's work while training at SUNY Purchase, Abraham has long admired Cunningham's collaborative ethos and experimental rigor.[16]

One of Kyle Abraham's most significant choreographic interventions into Cunningham's legacy is his centering of emotional intimacy and relational dynamics—particularly through nuanced partner work. In *MotorRover*, a silent duet, Abraham draws on Cunningham's principles of spatial clarity and isolated movement but reimagines them

[10] After Merce, the Dances Go On, and Go On to Inspire, *The New York Times* (2021)

[11] Town, Country, and the Schoolyard, *The Brooklyn Rail* (2017)

[12] *Dialogue*, Liz Gerring (2021)

[13] *MotorRover*, Kyle Abraham (2021)

[14] *There's No Stopping Choreographer Kyle Abraham*, Victoria Looseleaf, (2023)

[15] *Begin Anywhere Review*, Cecilia Whalen (2025)

[16] *In Conversation with Merce (with BAC)*, Merce Cunningham Trust (2021)

through the fluidity and emotional resonance that characterize his company, *A.I.M. by Kyle Abraham*.[17] The silence in the work echoes Cunningham's own choice to create over 150 works without music, forcing audiences to heighten their attention to movement detail.[18] Abraham uses silence to heighten the audience's attention to movement detail which is seen in through the entire fifteen minute work where audiences in diverse venues remain hushed.[19] Since complete silence is impossible when working with human bodies, the sounds of feet sliding on the marley floor, breath, and jumps create an informal soundscape and provide internal timing for the dancers. This becomes especially evident in Abraham's duet during a climactic unison section, where the dancers, after completing inverse movements, meet and launch into a large, traveling jumping phrase across the studio (see Appendix A).

Abraham diverges by focusing on the performers' emotional connection, shared momentum, and physical proximity, elements largely absent from Cunningham's original duets. In the beginning of the piece, the dancers resemble statues, their movements precise and emotionally neutral, with phrase work that fills opposite areas of space. Gradually, they build toward a transition into pedestrian walks, conversational hand gestures, and direct eye contact during more subtle phrase work. By the end, they appear more like people—alive with emotional intention and vulnerability. This shift from technical detachment to emotional association unfolds gradually throughout the piece, culminating in a powerful reimagining of connection.

MotorRover is especially impactful considering Cunningham never choreographed a duet specifically for two male-identifying dancers.[20] The cast for the *Three Duets* digital program, Claude "CJ" Johnson and Donovan Reed, creates a quietly radical, queer reframing of the canon, centering new bodies and relationships while departing from traditional male-female partnering conventions. Abraham's choreography transforms formal technique into a vehicle for vulnerability, making emotional intimacy not just present but essential. Rather than deploying a constantly shifting stage environment, he grounds the duet in an unchanging frame, allowing the evolving relationship between the performers to take focus. In doing so, Abraham reinterprets Cunningham not only in movement vocabulary but also in intent—offering a deeply personal, humanized response to a legacy often rooted in abstraction.

Liz Gerring, *Dialogue* (2021)

One of Liz Gerring's most distinctive choreographic interventions into Cunningham's legacy is her use of formal structure as a flexible framework rather than a fixed system. A Juilliard-trained dancer, Gerring was introduced to Cunningham's work as a teenager after seeing a performance in Los Angeles, describing it as a moment when "the conversation felt natural."[21] Although she never danced in the Cunningham company, her choreography reflects a deep respect for his emphasis on clarity, alignment, and abstraction—principles she reinterprets through her own grounded and continuous movement vocabulary. In her choreographic response, Gerring views shapes as suggestions that are in constant flux, creating a dynamic give-and-take. This approach highlights the idea that people can be together yet remain independent, and they don't need to perform the same motion in exactly the same way.

This philosophy is clearly present in *Dialogue*, where Gerring treats structure as a scaffold for nuanced, interdependent relationships between the dancers. The way she balances connection and autonomy feels deliberate offers multiple audience interpretations. The dancers often appear as two individuals who are "tied" yet distinct—moving in close proximity but never fully collapsing into each other (see Appendix A). I'm struck by how minimal physical connection is, with only a hand or arm occasionally making brief contact, yet the dancers retain their autonomy. To me, this sense of separation becomes especially powerful during the

[17] A.I.M. by Kyle Abraham. (2021). *MotorRover.* A.I.M by Kyle Abraham. https://www.aimbykyleabraham.org/tours-archive/motorrover

[18] *Sidebar from BAM: The Complete Works Merce Cunningham*, Nancy Dalva (2011)

[19] Merce Cunningham, Liz Gerring, Kyle Abraham in 'Three Duets' at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Alex Bloomstein (2024)

[20] *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary*, Page 23, Carrie Noland (2020)

[21] *Liz Gerring and Kyle Abraham create new works for "In Conversation with Merce,"* Jeff Slayton (2021)

large running passes, where the dancers move in opposite directions but converge at the same point. It almost feels as if they are running toward or away from some invisible center, a subtle but profound gesture of both unity and divergence.

The cyclical structure of the piece enhances this dynamic, starting and ending with a plank roll drawn from Cunningham repertory. I find that the repetition of this motif, at both ends of the piece, brings a sense of continuity. Throughout, the poses maintain a strong, secure quality, but the transitions between them are fluid and controlled. This fluidity, particularly in the release of the upper body, is a departure from the rigidity associated with Cunningham's style. It creates a more continuous flow between shapes, something that feels softer, almost more intimate. In doing so, she extends Cunningham's legacy with a choreographic voice that is precise, relational, and unmistakably her own.

Another significant parallel lies in Gerring's decades-long collaboration with composer Michael J. Schumacher, which echoes Cunningham's enduring creative partnership with John Cage.[22] Like Cunningham, who believed that music and dance could be created independently and later presented together without needing to align, Gerring treats sound and movement as parallel but separate elements.[23] In her choreographic process, the music used in early improvisational phases often differs entirely from the final composition, emphasizing that the two elements evolve independently.[24] This approach reinforces Gerring's commitment to reimagining Cunningham's methods through her own lens, preserving the spirit of collaboration while challenging traditional expectations of musicality in dance.

Gerring's ongoing relationship with the Cunningham legacy was formally recognized through her Cage Cunningham Fellowship with the Merce Cunningham Trust prior to the *Three Duets* program and premiere of *Dialogue*.[25] She had the opportunity to engage more directly with archival material and pedagogical practices. This fellowship not only validated her choreographic inquiry but also positioned her as a contemporary voice continuing to evolve Cunningham's formal innovations.

John Scott, *Begin Anywhere* (2025)

Most recently, choreographer John Scott premiered *Begin Anywhere* at the Irish Arts Center in New York. The performance featured four continuous Cunningham solos (Changeling (1957), *Solo* (1975), and *Antic Meet* (1958) and an excerpted solo from *RainForest* (1968) followed by Scott's own choreographic response (see Appendix A). He collaborated with Irish traditional musician Mel Mercier, who had previously worked with the Cunningham Dance Company in the 1980s on John Cage's score for *Roaratorio*.[26] For *Begin Anywhere*, Scott and Mercier drew particular inspiration from *Roaratorio*, using it as a foundation for the work's sound and structure.

Scott worked closely with the five dancers, building much of the piece through chance-based methods. The choreography echoes Cunningham's structural games utilizing unexpected pairings and procedural randomness, but introduces new tonalities through intricate gestural detail, spontaneous interpersonal dynamics, and live counting. An emotional undercurrent ran throughout the piece, something that felt surprising and memorable in a work inspired by Cunningham's more detached aesthetic.[27] The minimal technical elements in the black box space also recalled Cunningham's approach to staging. As Cunningham believed, the mere presence of human bodies on stage was enough to frame them as spectacle, even without elaborate theatrical devices leaving gesture, lighting, and costume as flexible tools rather than narrative crutches.[28]

In viewing this piece, I interpret it as the most distinct response compared to the works of Abraham and Gerring. It offers a more experimental rehearsal aesthetic, where modern forms of chance

[22] Liz Gerring and Michael J. Schumacher on Horizon, Liz Gerring Dance Company, (2015)

[23] Remembering choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, Terry Gross, (2019)

[24] *Liz Gerring with Nancy Dalva*, Nancy Dalva, (2013)

[25] Dance News: Baryshnikov Arts Center Announces the 2018-19 Cage Cunningham Fellows, *The Dance Enthusiast*, (2018)

[26] *Begin Anywhere Review*, Cecilia Whalen (2025)

[27] *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary*, Page 23, Carrie Noland (2020)

[28] *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary*, Page 10, Carrie Noland (2020)

procedures are evident (see Appendix A). The piece incorporates counting in multiple languages live, creating a disorienting yet dynamic rhythm, and constantly changing spacings or pairings between dancers. This makes the choreography feel fluid and spontaneous. At times, the choreography emphasizes more contact, release, and moments of stopping and starting. Phrases are worked at different points, with a deliberate rejection of synchrony and predictability. This sense of unpredictability and openness to chance creates a more raw, unfinished quality that stands in stark contrast to the precision of Cunningham's work.[29]

Preservation and Marginalization

Merce Cunningham is widely recognized as a key figure in the postmodern dance movement. Alongside his white male collaborators, most notably composer John Cage, Cunningham pushed back against the conventions of modern dance, including those of his former mentor, Martha Graham, with whom he danced for several years.[30] He rejected narrative structure, emotional expression, and traditional musical accompaniment, instead pioneering a method of independence between movement and sound. While this was groundbreaking for its time, the institutional legacy of Cunningham's work has often been celebrated and preserved in major performance venues and exhibitions around the world—frequently at the expense of uplifting artists from historically marginalized communities. As a result, the prominence of white postmodern aesthetics has, in many cases, overshadowed the contributions of BIPOC artists whose voices were excluded from these same platforms.

Dance scholar, performer, and dramaturg, Rebecca Chaleff, critically addresses this dynamic in her essay *Activating Whiteness*, arguing that "the predominant whiteness of US American postmodern dance has created a false binary between white and nonwhite dancers and choreographers."[31] She points out that BIPOC artists are often framed as working in opposition to a dominant, white-centered canon—what she calls "choreographies of the margins."[32] While this framework acknowledges the contributions of these artists, it also reinforces whiteness as the central point of reference in the dance field. In the context of Cunningham's legacy, this raises important questions about who gets to be seen as innovative and whose work is consistently positioned as a "response" rather than a foundation. For additional context, throughout the history of Cunningham faculty, there has only been one Black teacher, Barba Ensley.[33] In recognition of her contributions and to address the lack of representation in the lineage, the Merce Cunningham Trust established the Barba Ensley Fellowship. This fellowship provides financial and institutional support for BIPOC dancers to study Cunningham Technique, with the goal of expanding access to the pedagogy and cultivating a more inclusive future for those engaging with Cunningham's legacy. Chaleff's critique invites a reconsideration of how we frame legacy—not just through preservation, but through a more inclusive understanding of influence, lineage, and authorship in postmodern and contemporary dance.

Additionally, queer reimagining is echoed in the work of former Cunningham dancer and scholar Neil Greenberg (Cunningham Company, 1979–1986), who continues to explore Cunningham's legacy through a critical, identity-driven lens.[34] In July 2025, Greenberg will lead *Queering Cunningham / Queering Form and Process: Performance-Making Strategies* at Movement Research in New York City.[35] The workshop investigates how Cunningham's collaboration with composer and life partner John Cage unfolded within what Greenberg terms an "open closet," a dynamic of visible yet unspoken queer partnership.[36] By queering Cunningham's legacy, Greenberg encourages dancers and choreographers

[29] *Begin Anywhere Review*, Chris O'Rourke, (2025)

[30] Cunningham, Balanchine, and Postmodern Dance, Banes & Carroll, Page 49, (2006)

[31] Activating Whiteness, Rebecca Chaleff, Page 78, (2018)

[32] Activating Whiteness, Rebecca Chaleff, Page 78, (2018)

[33] *Barbara Ensley Award,* Merce Cunningham Trust, (2025)

[34] *Neil Greenberg Talks about Really Queer Dance with Harps*, David Velasco, (2008)

[35] *Queering Cunningham / Queering Form and Process: Performance Making Strategies*, Movement Research, (2025)

[36] *Neil Greenberg Talks about Really Queer Dance with Harps*, David Velasco, (2008)

to reconsider the formal structures of the work through the lens of identity, intimacy, and personal narrative.

Most dance foundations in academic settings are still deeply rooted in a white, Eurocentric legacy. While often presented as representative of "American" dance, these curricula typically center white choreographers and exclude the voices, cultures, and contributions of non-white artists.[37] As a result, what's being taught doesn't reflect the full cultural reality of American dance. I see the *Three Duets* as an important step toward shifting that narrative, a project that intentionally brought together artists with different backgrounds to engage with Cunningham's legacy in new ways. It models how companies might create more inclusive, multifaceted interpretations of dance history.

Pentaxis and the Emergence of My Choreographic Voice

Pentaxis, performed by five students from the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, unfolds through five distinct solos that each developed collaboratively through both group and one-on-one rehearsals. Throughout the process, moments of spontaneous overlap emerged: a duet between Penelope Arthur and Ryan Brady, another between Calie Champoux and Kelsey Kirker, and a trio with Madison Domanski, Calie Champoux, and Kelsey Kirker. The work concludes with its only unison section, which revisits and reconfigures signature movement phrases from each dancer's solo. These solos were also featured in Calie Champoux's accompanying exhibition in the Corcoran Flagg Building (see Appendix C).

As a cast, we engaged in a shared research process that included virtual Cunningham technique classes, repertory study through the Merce Cunningham Trust's Dance Capsules, and compositional tasks rooted in imagery from iconic Cunningham shapes (see Appendix D). These practices mirrored the structured yet interpretive processes I observed in the work of choreographers like Liz Gerring and Kyle Abraham.

Inspired by Gerring's exploration of connection and separation, *Pentaxis* navigates individual spatial pathways while emphasizing proximity and shared timing over direct physical contact. Dancers appear "tied but separate," often inhabiting the same space without touching. This structure encourages a web of relational energy formed through shared space, stillness, and traveling patterns.

A significant choreographic intervention occurred late in the process, influenced by Kyle Abraham's *MotorRover*. I chose to remove my original sound score which had featured selections from *If Beale Street Could Talk* and music by Jorge Mendez and present the final version of *Pentaxis* in silence. This deliberate refusal of music created a shift in the temporal experience: dancers had to rely on internal timing and spatial awareness, and viewers were invited to engage with the work as a visual and kinesthetic experience rather than one dictated by musical rhythm. The absence of music allowed movement to stand on its own, drawing attention to detail, breath, and performer presence.

This choice is also connected to my broader inquiry into which aspects of Cunningham's methods I choose to embrace and which I intentionally reject. *Pentaxis* accepts and builds on Cunningham's principles of stretch, expansion, and clarity of shape. However, it resists rigidity, predictable structure, and reliance on chance procedures. Rather than leaning on the randomness of chance, I made spatial choices that would change throughout the rehearsal process as each solo expanded, along with the spatial intuition of the dancer. This refusal marked an intentional step in shaping my own choreographic voice, where decision-making is responsive rather than randomized, and clarity of intention drives the form.

The title of the May 1st Thesis Showing, *SPACE // TIME*, reflects the foundational elements of both Cunningham's legacy and my response to it. Cunningham's work has often inspired a kind of timeless viewing, where sequences exist outside traditional narrative time. Similarly, *Pentaxis* asks viewers to lose track of conventional time. Without music, time becomes elastic; it stretches and folds in on itself. The dancers hold space rather than mark time.

SPACE refers to the varied ways the dancers travel, inhabit, and shape the space both individually and collectively. From solo spirals to shared diagonals and crossing pathways, spatial relationships carry the structural weight of the piece. Meanwhile, *TIME* refers not only to internal tempo and duration but

[37] Redefining American Dance in the Classroom: Responsibility to Racial Justice, Deanna Lynn Martinez, (2022)

also to historical time—specifically, how my work responds to a choreographic lineage while forging its own direction.

Ultimately, *Pentaxis* is a choreographic statement: a reflection of how Merce Cunningham's influence can be reinterpreted through a contemporary lens. It represents a refusal to replicate and instead an effort to respond. Through this process, I've come to see silence, refusal, and spatial attention as generative tools in shaping my artistic voice. I hope to continue evolving *Pentaxis* with other dancers, emerging choreographers, and future collaborators.

Conclusion

This thesis explores how contemporary choreographers build upon Merce Cunningham's innovations while preserving his artistic influence, through both critical analysis and embodied practice. By examining the work of Kyle Abraham, Liz Gerring, and John Scott—artists who reinterpret Cunningham's techniques through their own distinct choreographic lenses—I highlight how emotional intimacy, structural flexibility, and cross-cultural collaboration serve as critical interventions into the Cunningham canon. Each choreographer draws from Cunningham's principles, such as spatial clarity, non-narrative form, and independence of movement and music, while expanding their application to reflect contemporary identities, relationships, and aesthetics. My own choreographic work, *Pentaxis*, created in dialogue with Cunningham repertory and methods, mirrors this ongoing exchange between preservation and transformation. Through both research and practice, this project affirms that Cunningham's legacy is not static but evolving, sustained by artists who continue to question, reinterpret, and reimagine his work in ways that resonate with the present.

Looking forward, I see significant potential for expanding how Cunningham's work is taught, shared, and experienced. While his technique has long held a revered place in dance history, its future will depend on accessible, low-cost, and inclusive opportunities for training, particularly outside of major dance institutions. As more choreographers adapt and reinterpret his legacy, I believe there is space for alternative forms of certification, digital archives, and open-access platforms that allow emerging artists to engage with his methods on their own terms. My hope is that future iterations of Cunningham pedagogy are not only rigorous but also expansive, inviting a new generation of artists to question, reshape, and carry forward his legacy in diverse and creative ways.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to pursue this Honors Thesis research and to perform Cunningham repertory as an undergraduate student. This project has been a culmination of years of study, growth, and collaboration, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have shared this experience with so many supportive people.

First, I would like to thank my mom for her endless support and guidance throughout my undergraduate career. I am also thankful for my sister, whose encouragement has meant so much to me, and for my extended family and friends, who have supported my dance training and cheered me on through many performances over the years.

A heartfelt thank you to Silas Riener for setting the solos from the Trust, and to Gabriel Mata for providing the studio and performance space that made this work possible. I am also grateful to CTAD, the Luther Rice Fellowship, and the Enosinian Scholars Program for their generous support of this project.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my thesis committee—Anna Kimmel, Tariq O'Meally, and Thiago Moreira—for their guidance, encouragement, and expertise throughout this process. I am deeply grateful for their support and have great admiration for their work as both professors and artists.

Finally, to my cast—Calie, Kelsey, Penelope, and Ryan—thank you for bringing such joy, professionalism, and enthusiasm to every rehearsal. I will miss dancing with you all and hope our paths cross again in the future. A special thank you to Madison Domanski for your artistic collaboration and for sharing our final performance together.

References

A.I.M. by Kyle Abraham. (2021). *Motorrover*. A.I.M by Kyle Abraham. https://www.aimbykyleabraham.org/tours-archive/motorrover

Banes, S., & Carroll, N. (2006). Cunningham, Balanchine, and Postmodern Dance. *Dance Chronicle, 29*(1), 49–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/01472520500538057

Barbara Ensley Award. Merce Cunningham Trust. (2025). https://www.mercecunningham.org/activities/barbara-ensley-award/

Bloomstein, A. (2024). *Dance Review: Merce Cunningham, Liz Gerring, Kyle Abraham in "three duets" at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival*. The Berkshire Edge. https://theberkshireedge.com/dance-review-merce-cunningham-liz-gerring-kyle-abraham-in-three-duets-at-jacobs-pillow-dance-festival/

Chaleff, R. (2018). Activating whiteness: Racializing the ordinary in US american postmodern dance. *Dance Research Journal, 50*(3), 71–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0149767718000372

Dalva, N. (2011). Sidebar from BAM: The Complete Works Merce Cunningham. *The Brooklyn Rail*. https://brooklynrail.org/2011/12/dance/sidebar-from-bam-the-complete-works-merce-cunningham/

Dalva, N. (2013, September 4). Liz Gerring with Nancy Dalva. *The Brooklyn Rail*. https://brooklynrail.org/2013/09/dance/liz-gerring-with-nancy-dalva/

Gerring, L. (2021). *Dialogue*. Liz Gerring Dance Company. https://www.lizgerringdance.org/dialogue

Gerring, L. (2015). *Liz Gerring and Michael J. Schumacher on Horizon*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGE_BcCWdAE

Greenberg, N. (2025). *Queering Cunningham / Queering Form and Process: Performance Making Strategies*. Movement Research. https://movementresearch.org/workshops/2859/

Gross, T. (2019). *Remembering choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2019/04/05/710263920/remembering-choreographer-and-dancer-merce-cunningham

Looseleaf, V. (2023). *There's no stopping choreographer Kyle Abraham*. San Francisco Classical Voice. https://www.sfcv.org/articles/artist-spotlight/theres-no-stopping-choreographer-kyle-abraham

Martinez, D. L. (2022). Redefining American dance in the classroom: Responsibility to racial justice. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 23*(SI 1.3). http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea23si1.3

Merce Cunningham Trust. (2025). *About Merce Cunningham*. https://www.mercecunningham.org/about/biography/

Merce Cunningham Trust. (2025). *Cunningham Technique*.https://www.mercecunningham.org/the-work/cunningham-technique/

Merce Cunningham Trust. (2021). *In Conversation with Merce (with BAC)*. https://vimeo.com/620234149 (Password Protected Vimeo)

Merce Cunningham Trust. (2008). *The Legacy Plan*. https://www.mercecunningham.org/themes/default/db_images/documents/Merce_Legacy_Plan.pdf

Noland, C. (2020). *Merce Cunningham: After the arbitrary*. The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226541389.001.0001

O'Rourke, C. (2025, March 12). *Begin anywhere*. The Arts Review. https://www.theartsreview.com/single-post/begin-anywhere

Salva, M. (2024). Cunningham: Change, a Legacy Continues (Thesis). https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/1414/

Seibert, B. (2021). Review: After Merce, the dances go on, and go on to inspire. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/arts/dance/in-conversation-with-merce-cunningham-review.html

Slayton, J. (2021, September 28). *Liz Gerring and Kyle Abraham create new works for "In conversation with Merce."* L.A. Dance Chronicle. https://www.ladancechronicle.com/liz-gerring-and-kyle-abraham-create-new-works-for-in-conversation-with-merce/

The Dance Enthusiast. (2018). *Dance news: Baryshnikov Arts Center announces the 2018-19 Cage Cunningham Fellows.* https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/dance-news/view/Dance-News-Baryshnikov-Arts-Center-Announces-2018-19-Cage-Cunningham-Fellows

Velasco, D. (2008). *Neil Greenberg Talks about Really Queer Dance with Harps.* Artforum. https://www.artforum.com/interviews/neil-greenberg-talks-about-really-queer-dance-with-harps-20588

Wenzel, R. (2017). Town, Country, and the Schoolyard. *The Brooklyn Rail.* https://brooklynrail.org/2017/05/dance/Town-Country-and-the-Schoolyard/

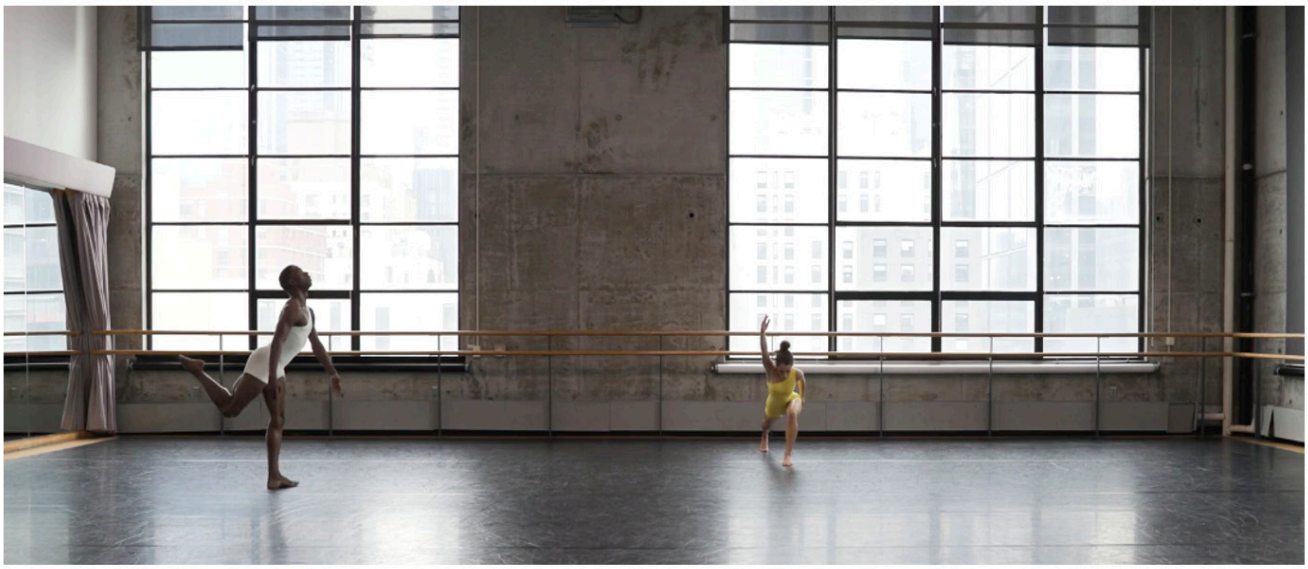
Whalen, C. (2025). Begin anywhere. *Fjord Review.* https://fjordreview.com/blogs/all/begin-anywhere

Appendix A: Choreographic Response Images

Images 1 & 2:

Claude 'CJ' Johnson and Donovan Reed in a climactic unison sequence from MotorRover, highlighting the embodied soundscape and internal timing within silent choreography (2021).

Image 3:



Mariah Anton-Arters and Cemiyon Barber in completing independent phrase work along with connection between complementary shapes in Dialogue (2021).

Image 4:

Four Solos **by Merce Cunningham and John King, and *Begin Anywhere* by John Scott and Mel Mercier, Irish Arts Center. Dancers counting aloud and breaking into individual solos (2025).**

Viewing Notes:

- I have seen *MotorRover* multiple times: in February 2024 at George Mason University, in July 2024 at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, and in March 2025 at the University of Maryland.
- I watched *Dialogue* live at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in July 2024.
- I have only seen *Begin Anywhere* via a private YouTube link provided by John Scott.

Appendix B: Scholar Artist Showing Links, Program, & Photographs

- In-Progress *Pentaxis*: https://vimeo.com/1069308755/95718f500c
- *Scramble* (1967)
- *Signals* (1970)
- Program: Scholar-Artist Preview Program & Run of Show: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1b6fr6O2Q2KoxBLdhPzCtaxvIilVrA4Zm43s7lhWER88/edit?usp=sharing

Ana Arledge performing *Scramble* (1967) and *Signals* (1970), staged by former Merce Cunningham Company member Silas Riener during the dress rehearsal and performance at the Fillmore School Studio (February 2025).

(Left to right) Gabriel Mata, Ana Arledge, and Anna Kimmel participating in a post-performance talkback at the Fillmore School Studio (February 2025).

Appendix C: Image & Wall Label of the NEXT Festival Installation in the Corcoran Flagg Building

NEXT Festival Installation at the Corcoran Flagg Building (April 2025).

Wall Label:

Ana Arledge
Residence: Florida
Degree: BA in Dance
Merce Cunningham's Legacy: Influences on Contemporary Dance Practices
Material/Medium: Multimedia

Project Description:
This exhibition showcases photographs and multimedia elements documenting the creative and embodied research process behind Arledge's investigation of Merce Cunningham's enduring influence on contemporary dance. Once considered radical, Cunningham's abstraction—defined by clarity, strength, flexibility, unpredictable shifts in direction, and varied rhythmic structures—challenged traditional dance conventions and shaped postmodern movement. Today, with direct training no longer possible, his legacy is transmitted through second- and third-generation instructors and preserved by the Merce Cunningham Trust and its *Dance Capsules*, which archive 86 works from 1942 to 2009.

Through embodied research, Arledge examined how dance artists integrate Cunningham's pedagogical approaches into their teaching and choreography. This process included sustained engagement in Cunningham Technique, archival research, and the development of new work in response to his methods. Arledge's research culminated in two performances: the restaging of *Scramble* (1967) and *Signals* (1970), staged by former Cunningham Company Member Silas Riener, and *Pentaxis*, Arledge's own choreographic response, performed by dancers from the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design.

This exhibition provides an intimate look into the rehearsals, creative discoveries, and archival explorations that informed Arledge's work, offering a visual narrative of Cunningham's lasting impact and her evolving artistic voice.

Photography and installation design completed in collaboration with Calie Champoux.

Generous support for this work was provided by the Luther Rice Undergraduate Research Fellowship and the Enosinian Scholars Program, with additional guidance from the Merce Cunningham Trust.

Appendix D: Archival Images of Cunningham Repertory/Poses That Inspired Shapes in Pentaxis

Rehearsal Images:

Image 1: Ana Arledge with dancers (from left) Kelsey Kirker and Calie Champoux in rehearsal (2025).

Image 3: Calie Champoux in rehearsal (2025).

Image 5: Kelsey Kirker in rehearsal (2025).

Image 7: Madison Domanski in rehearsal (2025).

Cunningham:

Image 2:Merce Cunningham, *Scenario*, 1997 Dancers (from left) Tom Caley, Lisa Boudreau, Glen Rumsey. Photo: Jacques Moatti

Image 4: Image from *Cunningham* film (2020).

Image 6 & 8: Guardian Article, Rooted in the here and now ... Merce Cunningham (second from right) with his dancers (1986).

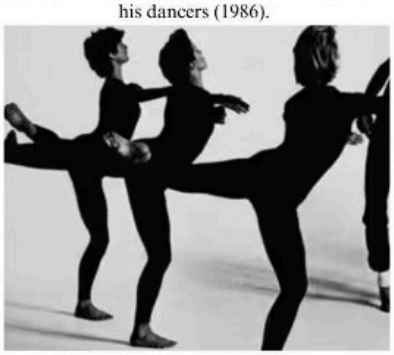


Image 9: Ana Arledge with dancers (from left) Ryan Brady and Penelope Arthur in rehearsal (2025).

Image 10: Screenshot taken from MinEvent (2006) by Merce Cunningham.

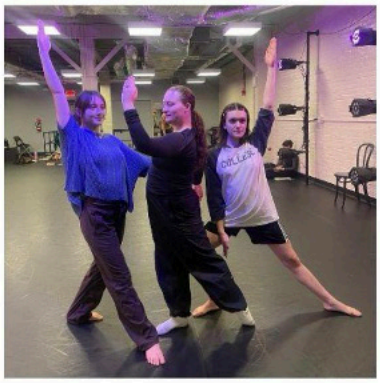


Image 11: Dancers (from left) Kelsey Kirker, Madison Domanski, & Calie Champoux in rehearsal (2025).

Image 12: Screenshot taken from MinEvent (2006) by Merce Cunningham.

Image 13: Ana Arledge working with Ryan Brady in rehearsal (2025).

Image 14: Screenshot taken from Nearly 90^2 performance (2011).