

A scene from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Antic Meet*.



Dance in time

As the Merce Cunningham Dance Company prepares to disband, **Michelle Potter** remembers some memorable performances

In 1976 Canberra audiences had the opportunity to see one of the world's most intriguing contemporary dance companies. The New York-based Merce Cunningham Dance Company performed at the Adelaide Festival in February of 1976 and following that engagement stopped off for a two-night season at the Canberra Theatre.

Cunningham and his music associate, John Cage, had developed a unique philosophy that dance and music should exist separately and it was well known that, when put into practice, audiences found such an idea difficult. I had a friend with whom I'd gone to school and ballet school who had left Australia, studied at the Juilliard School in New York and then had joined the Cunningham company in the early 1970s. I was curious to see what it was that had attracted her.

The 1976 Canberra program included one of Cunningham's most exquisite pieces: *Summerspace*, a work created in 1958 with backcloth and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg and music by Morton Feldman. The work was about space, how we perceive it and how it can be occupied. In a seemingly random way, dancers appeared on and disappeared from the stage and the dance also seemed to be going on in the wings and backstage. Rauschenberg's backcloth was painted in pointillist style with a myriad of dots in tones of green, gold and brown. The dancers' tights and leotards were painted in a similar manner and, as a result, at times the dancers seemed to disappear into the backcloth.

Now, 35 years later the Cunningham company is about to disband. Cunningham died in 2009 and the

enterprise he led for over 60 years is currently into its second year of a "legacy program", an initiative designed to showcase seminal works from the Cunningham repertoire. In this final year of the program, the company has just completed a season of three revivals at the Joyce Theatre in New York. The program comprised *CRWDSPCR* (1993), *Quartet* (1982) and *Antic Meet* (1958) and represented three major strands in Cunningham's creative process.

CRWDSPCR, is perhaps best summed up by a member of the audience who sprang to her feet as the work finished and shouted, "Bit of work!" *CRWDSPCR* begins with its full complement of 13 dancers on stage and for the 25 minutes or so that the dance lasts, apart from one slow solo section, the dancers weave themselves across the stage to John King's electronic score, *blues '99*. The energy is frenetic as the dancers manoeuvre past each other like the crowds at Grand Central Station. *CRWDSPCR* is a little like ordered chaos, but brilliantly designed choreographically and brilliantly executed by the current Cunningham company.

The choreographic design of *CRWDSPCR* owes more than a little to technology. The work was created by Cunningham using the software program LifeForms (now DanceForms), a 3-D character animation product. Ever the innovator and ever on the lookout for new ways of generating dance, Cunningham has had an ongoing interest in using technology as a choreographic tool. *CRWDSPCR* represents that stream of Cunningham's creative thinking.

Quartet is the most powerful of the three works on the program and represents Cunningham's

engagement with two major collaborators of the 1970s, designer Mark Lancaster and composer David Tudor. Although called *Quartet*, it is made for five dancers, four who perform Cunningham's choreography of off-balance poses, asymmetrical partnering and fast turns, and a fifth dancer who remains separated from the four. The choreography for this loner is composed of twisted, sudden movements especially of the arms, and is performed largely with the dancer standing on the spot. The role was originally danced by Cunningham himself and the work was created as arthritis was beginning to take its toll on his body. In the Joyce season the role was danced by current choreographic director of the company, Robert Swinston. It is tempting to suggest that Swinston was posing as Cunningham. But he isn't Cunningham and what Swinston was able to suggest was that *Quartet* is a work about belonging and not belonging.

Dressed simply by Lancaster in tights and leotards in luscious colours of olive, brown and burnished reds and blues, *Quartet* is performed to Tudor's electronic score *Sextet for Seven*, played live at the Joyce by Takehisa Kosugi, the company's current music director.

Antic Meet the third work on the program took me back to Canberra in 1976. It was totally fascinating as representative of work from the early Cunningham period when money was short, the company was small and collaboration between three artistic giants – Cunningham, Cage and Rauschenberg – was a highlight of the repertoire.

Danced to Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* and comprising a series of slight, unrelated moments (antics) for six dancers, four women and two men, *Antic Meet* is vaudeville, theatre of the absurd and a Dada event rolled into one with the strength of piece coming from the visual and musical accompaniments and the juxtaposition of sections rather than from the choreography itself. Rauschenberg's costumes, all worn over black tights and a black leotard, are eclectic. He has recorded that Cunningham gave him "a licence to do anything" since Cunningham never believed that one art form should be subordinate to another. "Anything" often meant using found items, items sourced from thrift shops or additions to basic articles of clothing that turned them into dance costumes with a difference.

In one section the four women wear dresses originally fashioned from government surplus parachutes. They are joined by a male dancer wearing a four-armed neckless sweater. The sweater becomes the dancer as it is swung, twisted and stretched by the live dancer underneath its eccentric construction. Others of Rauschenberg's *Antic Meet* costumes include a fur coat and worn by a dancer as he drags another off-stage, a long Victorian-style nightdress, and some remarkably contemporary-looking black T-shirts with a plastic hoop inserted along the hemlines. Along with a chair strapped to a dancer's back and an assortment of props including a door on wheels leading nowhere, the whole is light-heartedly bizarre.

Despite a regret that the company has such a short time to live as the end of 2011 looms closer, what a pleasure it was to see works from across the repertoire of this enterprising company and to link back to a remarkable night in Canberra all those years ago.