

Being Merce:

Merce Cunningham died a couple of days ago. He was a dancer and a choreographer. He was one of the two or three greatest in each of those categories who ever walked (not walked actually, but floated) across this lovely planet.

What's so special about a dancer? If you have a couple of minutes I'll tell you what I know. I come by this knowledge honestly having been married to a dancer early in my adult life. I'll call her Isadora to protect the innocent. I spent several years shaking my head in amazement at the skills and courage necessary to be anything like successful in their extraordinary field.

Professional dancers, people who do it for a living, people who need to dance like you and I need to eat, are a special breed of athlete. Each tradition is different of course but it doesn't matter whether the artist dances ballet or modern or ballroom or break. Dancers force their bodies to do things as a matter of routine that would put the rest of us in traction. Their strength, flexibility and daring are the equivalent of or superior to any other athlete you care to mention. The physical chances they take to get a move right, the repetition they endure in order to make that special move repeatable, the pain they bear from chronic injuries across years and years of work all admit dancers to the most exclusive of athletic clubs.

Mr. Cunningham in his prime was an astounding athlete. His leaping ability was legendary. He would be walking across the stage and then somehow rise three or four feet in the air and strike a pose while doing so. His vertical was the equivalent of Nureyev or Jordan (Michael). I don't know how any of those three did what they did but I do know that I saw them do it.

As impressive as his physical prowess was his mind may have been even stronger. It was no easy thing for a man to decide, back in the 30's and 40's, to be a dancer. He studied and excelled at both ballet and modern. That's a little like Babe Ruth being the best pitcher and the best hitter at the same time. Then he put the two disciplines together into forms that were entirely new.

At the time he got serious about creating new dance pieces the ballet world and the modern school absolutely hated each other. Each saw the other as the enemy of Art. In the hands of Merce they melded into something no one had seen before. And then he repeated the magic year after year in dance after dance until his death at the age of ninety.

I have a confession to make. I have never been a fan of the dance. It has never gotten to me in the way great music or writing does. I'm not sure why but the emotional payload is not there for me. I've attended a lot of dance. In the days of being married to the art I saw all the greats and met quite a few of them too. But while I always remained cool to the art I was absolutely smitten with the artists. Finer specimens of the human form and spirit I have never seen. These people, these dancers are insane! A lovely, crazy passion for moving possesses them. They make sitting down interesting. I would watch them brush their teeth because they'd find a beautiful way to do it.

I remember a time when Meredith Monk (talk about crazy) was in town. Isadora and I put out a spread for Monk's troupe and the studio that Isadora was dancing with, about fifteen dancers in all. I recall setting out the veggies and dips and breads and meaty things and fruit and cheese and desserts, calling out to folks that the food was served, and being run over by the wildest herd of lithesome animals that ever wrecked a buffet. Folks, I'm talking locusts here! When it came to my turn at the table I was met with melon rinds, a few olive pits, one meatball and the grateful smiles of well fed athletes. It was worth it. I wish I could have that evening back, just once. I wish I could rub shoulders with those artists for just a few minutes again. That would be sweet. Thanks Isadora, for showing me what joyous passion looks like.

All of which is to say that the great Merce Cunningham was all of the above and more. He defined dance and choreography for the better part of fifty years. There are hundreds of dancers of all stripes who owe him their calluses. His like will not come again. Take a moment if you will, sometime today, and walk across the room in the most graceful way you possibly can, as if you are floating. It'll give you some idea of what it must have been like to be Merce.