

IN MEMORIAM

Robert Ellis Dunn (1928-1996)

Robert Ellis Dunn, theorist and teacher, whose classes in improvisation and choreography led to the birth of postmodernist dance in the early 1960s, died on July 5, 1996 at his home in New Carrollton, Maryland. He is survived by his wife, Gretchen. Dunn was sixty-seven. He was born in Oklahoma and toured his home state as a tap dancer before pursuing music studies at the New England Conservatory and earning a B.A. in 1958. He studied dance at the Boston Conservatory of Music from 1955 to 1958 before becoming an accompanist and musical assistant to Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, José Limón, and other major American modern dance choreographers. He studied music theory with John Cage and was encouraged by Cage to teach choreography. He described the influence of Cage on his own work as one of the greatest learning occasions of his life. Work from Dunn's nontraditional classes in improvisation and choreography, which were attended by performing and visual artists such as Simone Forti, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer, was shown in a concert in July 1962 at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. The event, which marked the postmodernist Judson Dance Theater movement, was the first avant-garde movement in dance theater in this country since the modern dance of the 1930s and 1940s. It changed the very attitude and culture of dance performance forever.

Dunn lived and communicated his philosophies and aesthetics with brilliance throughout his life. He taught choreography, improvisation and movement analysis at various universities including Columbia University Teachers College, the University of Maryland at College Park, and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Dunn, who was a member of the Congress on Research in Dance, served as first assistant curator of the Dance Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center from 1965 to 1972. He was the recipient of a "Bessie" New York Dance and Performance Award in 1985, and the American Dance Guild Award in 1988. He also received special recognition in 1993 when the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in New York established a scholarship in his name.

A memorial service for Robert Ellis Dunn was held in the Garden Room at Judson Memorial Church on December 8, 1996. Performances and workshops organized by Movement Research in his honor took place in February 1997, and Movement Research's issue, *Performance Journal* #14, recognized Dunn's legacy. *Contact Quarterly* will also feature articles on Dunn in an upcoming issue. In addition, "DanceFindings: Robert Ellis Dunn Videodance Installation" was on display at the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University in Milwaukee from January 30 to March 30, 1997. Created by Dunn and videographer Matthew Chernov, "DanceFindings" is a multiscreen, three-channel installation taken from images collected during one of Dunn's dance workshops. A catalogue from the exhibition is available. Other events in conjunction with the exhibition opening included a lecture, a symposium on "Robert Ellis Dunn and American Contemporary Dance," movement workshops, and dance performances.

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