

Singapore Arts Festival Resource Pack

Dance to Remember: Merce Cunningham

This resource pack contains 1 lesson which lasts for 90 minutes.

Contents

Introduction	3
Preparation	4
Lesson Plan	5
Recommended resources	9
Annex 1	

Introduction

Workshop - Dance to Remember: MERCE CUNNINGHAM (90 minutes)

Merce Cunningham (April 16, 1919 – July 26, 2009) was an innovative American dancer and choreographer who received international recognition for the work he accomplished with his company, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He began his training at the Cornish School in Seattle, where the young Merce met Martha Graham, a pioneer of the modern dance movement. She invited him to join the Martha Graham Dance Company, which still exists till this day. As a choreographer, he was noted for his collaborations with various other artists, such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg. These works left deep impressions on the experimental art community. His methods for choreography include Chance Operations, in which external sources are used for dance decision-making. Chance Operations include consulting the I-Ching, a Chinese classic divination system, for the sequence of his dances and rolling a dice to determine the choreographic, musical and set design elements for each night's performance. Later in his career, he adopted the Life Forms animation program, which allowed him to create movement phrases on the computer before transferring them to his dancers. Cunningham's exploratory spirit never grows old and young dancers across the world continue to study the Cunningham technique for dance training.

"With the computer, much as with a camera, you can freeze-frame something that the eye didn't catch," said Merce Cunningham about his use of technology in choreography. Cunningham was well known for his abstract dance pieces that were influenced by his study of Zen Buddhism, experience with animation software and observations of nature. This resource packet guides teachers in introducing their students to the techniques and philosophy behind Cunningham's choreographic process.

Preparation

Theme 1: Life Forms

- 1) Collect images of athletes and dancers in motion. Images of people in interesting shapes and positions are also suitable for this activity.
- 2) Collect enough images so that each group can work with 6 - 8 images.

Theme 2: Chance Operations

- 1) Select 2 pieces of music that are similar in tempo (speed) but vary in quality or mood.
- 2) Prepare a dice and a specific area to throw the dice.

Talk Back

- 1) Search for video clips of Merce Cunningham's dances and interviews on the internet. Suggested weblinks are included as recommended resources.
- 2) Make the necessary technical arrangements for screening the video clips.

LESSON PLAN

Theme 1: Life Forms

Description: Life Forms (now Dance Forms) is an animation program that Merce Cunningham used from the 1990s to build and retain dance phrases. He choreographed dances on a figure in the software and would later present that choreography to his dancers, who learnt the movement from the images of the dancing figure on screen. In Theme 1: Life Forms, students view images of athletes and dancers in motion as inspiration for them to create dance movement.

Objectives:

To introduce students to the artistic concepts of Merce Cunningham
 To stimulate the creativity and sense of experimentation among the students

Outcomes:

Students will be able to briefly introduce Merce Cunningham's artistic concepts to others
 Students will be able to create a short dance based on studies inspired by Merce Cunningham

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) Split the students into groups of 3-4 each. | 2 min |
| 2) Distribute the images to the groups (6 – 8 images per group) and have them imitate the shape or suggested movement in each of the images. For example, if the image portrays a basketball player in mid air, the suggested movement would be a jump. | 8 min |
| 3) Once the groups have practiced imitating the shapes, instruct them to create fluid transitions between the shapes. If more prompting is needed, have them attempt to move between the shapes in slow motion. This is the dance phrase. | 10 min |
| 4) Invite the groups to perform their dance phrases for each other. | 10 min |
| 5) Encourage the groups to remember their dance phrases for Theme 2: Chance Operations. | Total: 30 min
Use pre-selected images |

Theme 2: Chance Operations

Description: Merce Cunningham devised several decision-making strategies, which were collectively known as Chance Operations. Before performances of several productions, such as *Split Sides*, Cunningham or invited guests would roll a dice to decide which of 2 pieces of choreography to perform, which of 2 pieces of music to play, and which of 2 sets of stage design to feature. In this Theme 2: Chance Operations, students experience Cunningham's process of decision-making, much like in a board game, and learn about one technique of putting together a dance production.

Objective:

To engage students in a dance-making process of Merce Cunningham

Outcome:

Students will be able to identify key elements in a dance-making process

- 1) Instruct each group to partner up with another group. Have them designate a Group A and a Group B within the pairings. 5 min
- 2) Play your pre-selected pieces of music for the students, naming the first piece Music 1 and the second Music 2. Discuss the quality or mood of each piece of music with the students and encourage them to talk about the similarities and differences between Music 1 and Music 2. 5 min
- 3) Pick one group pairing to begin the game.
- 4) Roll the dice to determine whether Group A or Group B will perform their dance phrase from Theme 1: *Life Forms*. An odd number indicates Group A and an even number indicates Group B. 5 min
- 5) Roll the dice again to determine which piece of music to play. An odd number indicates Music 1 and an even number indicates Music 2. 5 min
- 6) Invite the designated group to perform their dance phrase with the designated music. 5 min

- 7) Invite the remaining group to perform their dance phrase with the remaining music.
- 8) Repeat steps 4 – 7 with all of the group pairings. 10 min
- 9) Lead the students in discussing their experience performing for fellow students and how the element of chance impacted their performance. 10 min

Total: 45 min
Use dice and
pre-selected
music.

Talk Back

Description: Students view video clips of Merce Cunningham's work and/or interviews to enhance their understanding of his artistic concepts and to make a connection between their experience with the activities and Cunningham's own choreography.

- 1) Play the selected video clips for the students. 5 min
- 2) Invite them to describe what they see and feel from the video clips. Lead the students in a discussion about how the dances in the video clips relate to their experience participating in the activities from this packet. 5 min
- 3) Ask questions that relate to the use of Chance Operations and technology in dance, such as: How do you think people saw dances before videotaping, television sets and the internet came about? How do Chance Operations affect the way that the dancers prepare for a performance? 5 min

Total: 15 min.

Recommended Resources

Official Website:

<http://www.merce.org>

Books Available at National Library Board:

Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time edited by Richard Kostelanetz

Merce Cunningham : The Modernizing of Modern Dance by Roger Copeland

The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline

Lesschaeve

Chance and Circumstance by Carolyn Brown

Videorecordings Available at the National Library Board:

Split Sides (reference only)

Points in Space (reference only)

Internet Links to Video Samples:

Merce Cunningham Dance Company Website: Mondays with Merce

<http://www.merce.org/about/mondays-with-merce.php>

Excerpt of *Points in Space*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGYdmLXiDDo>

Excerpt of *Split Sides* (roll of dice)

<http://vimeo.com/10796843>

Internet Links to Articles and Interviews:

Merce Cunningham: A lifetime of Dance – Public Broadcasting Service

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/merce-cunningham/a-lifetime-of-dance/566/>

Merce Cunningham Articles and Videos – New York Times

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/merce_cunningham/index.html

Singapore Arts Festival 2011

Remembers Merce Cunningham
With a performance of *Flip Book*
Conceived by Boris Charmatz

Official Website:

<http://www.museedeladanse.org>

Annex 1

FEEDBACK FORM

Thank you for using this resource pack.
Please give us your feedback.



Name : _____
Occupation : _____
Tel : _____
Email : _____

Name of Resource Pack			
Usefulness of the Resource Pack	Very applicable	Applicable	Not applicable
What did you enjoy most from this Resource Pack?			
Any suggestion on how to improve this Resource Pack?			

Thank you once again!