

# Lucinda Childs, Philip Glass, and Sol LeWitt 'Dance' at Bard's Summerscape

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- Photo by Stephanie Berger



Lucinda Childs Dance Company in her 1979 "Dance," with the original performers seen in Sol LeWitt's film.

## Details:

Lucinda Childs Dance Company  
Richard B. Fisher Center, Bard College  
July 10 through 12

This year, the intrepid and stimulating Bard Summerscape features Richard Wagner—his music and his world. Yet the seven weeks of performances, films, talks, and symposia open with a dance set to music by Philip Glass—a composer whose aesthetic is so far from *sturm und drang* that it might be arriving from a distant galaxy. Lucinda Childs's 1979 *Dance*, which includes a film version of it by Sol LeWitt, is as pure as its title. It'll certainly clear spectators' palates for such events as Agamemnon's bloody trilogy, *The Oresteia*, as translated by Ted Hughes, and the mob violence depicted in the opera *Les Huguenots* by Wagner's contemporary, Giacomo Meyerbeer.

Even Frank Gehry's design for the Fisher Center seems almost florid in comparison with *Dance*—the luscious curves of its silver roof a reproach to Minimalism. Yet the simplicity of Childs's and Glass's palettes engender complexity—burgeoning through repetition, accumulation, and variation. Eight performers, plus a soloist for the middle section of the three-part, 60-minute work, weave their patterns behind a scrim onto which is projected LeWitt's film of *Dance* three decades earlier. Glass's music is the film's soundtrack. The 2009 *Dance* expands the contrasts between actual and virtual, life-sized

and larger than life, and living color versus black-and-white into a dialogue with the piece's own history.

The piece establishes a serene liveliness from the outset. One by one, pairs of dancers cross the stage from left to right, as if drawing the horizontal lines for the grid on the filmed floor. Men and women alike wear long-sleeved, white leotards and trimly cut pants (original designs by A. Christina Giannini). Gradually, the small, tilted side leaps and understated turns and hops acquire additions, such as four quick little steps that briefly switch the dancers' focus to two diagonals. Larger leaps appear, and more turns. Childs has used the term "space devouring" to describe the skeining patterns. That's apt. In pairs and fours, in counterpoint or unison, the dancers seem to skim across the stage like dragonflies, alighting only to take off. The music bears them on its rippling surface.

There's a difference between today's dancers and those of the earlier generation. These, like most dancers today, have probably had ballet training. Leaping, they tend to flash their legs apart a few more degrees than their forebears do. That adds to the clarity of the design. Also, they wear soft jazz shoes rather than white sneakers, so they can point their feet more swiftly and strongly. On the other hand, I prefer the fluid, free-flowing arms of the dancers in the film to the more precise positions their onstage doubles etch. Back then, the avant-garde aesthetic honored the everyday in both posture and understated energy.

LeWitt edited his film in ways that play games with the minimalist aesthetic. The filmed dancers disappear at times, just as the living ones often travel offstage, leaving it briefly empty. But the former may reappear transformed. Sometimes they're huge, looming over the action onstage. A couple of times, they're the same size as their counterparts, but above their heads; it looks as if they're dancing on a virtual building's second floor, and Beverly Emmons's beautiful lighting (also integral to the original production) turns the world of the dancers below a deep blue. Sometimes the film splits in two. The interplay between the fixed sizes of the live dancers and the altering sizes of the filmed dancers imparts an illusion of three-dimensionality to the whole structure, enhanced by the projection of the film's gridded floor over the white stage.

LeWitt occasionally froze the action, and when an immense image of Childs appears for the 20-minute solo that separates *Dance's* first and last parts, it looks like a still shot. Until she blinks. Glamorous, with beauty so severe that she makes Garbo at her stoniest look approachable, the Childs of 30 years ago made it clear that she was not out to seduce an audience, but to present intriguing equations. The choreography that she intermittently performs behind (in front of? above?) her present-day double, Caitlin Scranton, traces paths perpendicular to those introduced by the dancers in the first, bewitching part of the work. Big Childs and small Scranton travel toward us, then turn and walk toward the back of the stage. Walk? No, they stride—purposefully but lightly, almost on tiptoe, swinging stiff arms, and executing three-step turns that project a waltz's rhythm but never its abandonment. Circles become news.

For the last part of *Dance*, Emmons's lighting often turns the stage rosy or golden. The patterns—keyed to the changing phrase-lengths and speeds of the music—become more complicated. Criss-crossing Xs point out the diagonals. Repeatedly, one person in successive squads of four stands still, suddenly anchoring a corner of the square. LeWitt's editing gives the performers on film a more complex interaction with the live dancers. The steps—aerobically demanding to begin with—get more difficult. Balletomanes might see them as *piqué* turns or *emboités* or *sauts-au-basque*, performed with understated manners. I'm reminded that in 1980, the *New Yorker's* dance critic, Arlene Croce, wrote that Childs had developed "something that looks like prehistoric ballet."

A colleague who'd traveled farther than I had to be present at one of these 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary performances of the epochal Childs-Glass-LeWitt creation reminded me that we'd seen it together in the vast, far-from-full Northrop Auditorium in Minneapolis not long after it premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (where the Philip Glass Ensemble played the music live). Some in that Minneapolis audience walked out, some hissed and booed. Lovers of dance and music have come a long way. Glass's music has been heard in many contexts, even, I swear, during those moments when you wait for "the next available operator." Repetition now seems more reassuring than boring. Small changes are appreciated in a decade dominated by big, flamboyant ones. Most people left the Fisher Center thrilled by *Dance*, rightly seeing its performers as glistening, heroic elements of a mixed-media artwork.

I'm looking out the window of a train as I write this, watching a lake and distant trees that seem almost still through the fast-moving lacework of nearby foliage. Thinking of Childs's *Dance*, I see this dance of nature differently.