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Dunn, Robert Ellis [encyclopedia entry]

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Dunn, Robert Ellis

(born 28 December 1928 in Clinton, Oklahoma, died 5 July 1996 in New Carrollton, Maryland), American musician, teacher, choreographer, and founding member of the Judson Dance Theater.

Dunn studied and performed tap dance and music as a child in Oklahoma. He received a bachelor's degree in music from the New England Conservatory in 1958, studied dance at the Boston Conservatory with Jan Veen from 1955 to 1958, and received a master's degree in library science from Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1966. Dunn studied music with John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York City from 1958 to 1960 and with Irmgard Bartenieff at the Dance Notation Bureau from 1972 to 1974. He was influenced by Zen Buddhism and Daoism, by the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and by such literary artists as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Charles Olson.

During the early years of his career, Dunn worked as a musician, teacher, composer, choreographer, and occasional performer, mainly in Boston and New York. He was invited by Merce Cunningham in 1958, and subsequently by Martha Graham, to play for rehearsals, classes, and performances at the American Dance Festival in New London, Connecticut, and later in New York City. Dunn also played for Helen Tamiris and José Limón and performed with composers Richard Maxfield and La Monte Young. He was repertory coach for Boston Opera directors Boris Goldovsky and Sarah Caldwell. These opportunities, in addition to contact with Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and other seminal art world figures of the 1960s, placed Dunn in a position to absorb and participate as an artist and teacher in the evolution of American dance.

At the invitation of Cage and Cunningham, Dunn led a series of classes on choreography from 1960 to 1962, which became the basis for the Judson Dance Theater. Based in part on Cage's ideas, these classes drew upon Dunn's rich notions concerning music and movement. They incorporated the projects of choreographers Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton. Dunn's catalytic approach was to establish a climate of experimentation in workshop sessions and to provide a methodology for examining in detail the creative process and choreographic choices suggested by dances generated by workshop participants. Dunn arranged the order and spacing of the programs and contributed music for the first seven concerts of the Judson Dance Theater. Later participants, who gathered for the final workshop in the spring of 1964 at the studio of Judith Dunn, included second-generation dance innovators Lucinda Childs, Meredith Monk, Kenneth King, and Phoebe Neville.

Of particular importance to Dunn's approach to teaching were the influences of the Bauhaus art movement, emphasizing experimentation, basic materials, and design. In his analysis of choreography, Dunn focused on the strongest and most original qualities of what is seen—looking at the work as if it were one of a species. He analyzed the actual divisions of the piece with respect to temporal, imagistic, and narrative structures and considered the first interventions, or least changes, that might be undertaken to bring the piece into focus. From 1965 to 1972 Dunn was assistant curator for the New York Public Library's Dance Research Collection at the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. He assisted with producing the collection's Dance Index for Research. From 1970 to 1985 Dunn taught choreography at

Columbia University Teachers College, Hunter College, the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, the Laban Institute, the Dance Notation Bureau, and the Baltimore County campus of the University of Maryland. In 1985 he became professor of dance at the University of Maryland at College Park. His residencies at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Southern Methodist University, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and elsewhere extended the scope of his influence.

Between 1994 and his death in 1996 Dunn directed the preparation of *Dance Findings*, a videodance installation for the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, with the cooperation of the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee dance and film departments. This work, which was premiered at the Haggerty Museum in January 1997, was intended as a meditation on dance and the human body, and it documents Dunn's ideas on choreography. Dunn was the 1985 recipient of the New York Dance and Performance Award (the Bessie Award) and the 1988 recipient of the American Dance Guild Award.

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