

## HOW THE 60S NEW YORK ARTS SCENE REVOLUTIONISED DANCE

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New York in the 1960s saw a creative explosion as dancers, artists, poets and musicians came together – in a church. And the dance world is still feeling the fallout

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It's a sweltering September day in New York and Yvonne Rainer, one of the most iconoclastic choreographers of her generation, is having lunch in a SoHo restaurant that offers, among other mysterious and expensive things, "teenage lettuce". It's a world away from the bohemian SoHo that Rainer inhabited back in the 1960s, when the area's lofts were home to artists of every hue.

Yet Rainer, straight-backed, fiercely cogent and still creating work, remains true to the decade when downtown Manhattan was a pressure cooker of creativity and experimentation. It was a time, likened by some to 1920s Paris, when choreographers, painters, writers and musicians went on a collective mission to reinvent their art forms. And it was a time, in particular, when choreographers and visual artists formed a new bond, collaborating and influencing each other. The results changed both stage and gallery for ever.

"The art world was so much smaller then," Rainer says. "The same group of people were involved in music concerts, art events and dance concerts. It was an exhilarating time, a very heady time."

One of the key venues in this cultural explosion was a large Baptist church, presided over by a former-marine-turned-minister called Howard Moody, who had unusually hip, libertarian views of what his ministry involved. Impressed by the creative buzz emanating from Greenwich Village and beyond, Moody opened up Judson Memorial Church to local artists who needed space to exhibit, rehearse or perform but couldn't pay rent.

The minister astonished everyone with his tolerance of what went on in his church – as long as it didn't happen on a Sunday. Rainer once staged a work with naked dancers. "There was a huge scandal," she says. "I think the church was threatened with excommunication from the main Baptist organisation. But Howard didn't care."

In 1962, Rainer and a small group of passionately experimental choreographers founded the Judson Dance Theatre – but it was never just about dance. Musicians, poets and, above all, visual artists gave in to its pull, all of them participating in collective workshops and many, despite having no training, performing in works choreographed there. The most famous participant was Robert Rauschenberg. "He loved being around dancers," Rainer says. Others included sculptors and conceptual artists Robert Morris and Alex Hay. "We were a community of people who partied together, ate together, travelled together and worked together," says Hay. "I don't see anything like that today." It felt, he adds, like a family.

Pelicans and parachutes

Ideas were transmitted between dancers and artists almost by osmosis. Rauschenberg – fascinated by the idea of extending visual art into performance – was one of the first artists to try choreography. He made his debut with Pelican, in which he rollerskates dangerously around Carolyn Brown, the serene, exquisite Merce Cunningham dancer. Both are wearing parachutes that billow behind them like giant dragonfly wings. Some film of the 1963 piece survives, confirming Rainer's memory of it as an "extraordinary work".

This fascinating footage is one of the highlights of Move: Choreographing You, a new show that opens today at London's Southbank Centre. Its aim is to capture and celebrate that vital moment in the 1960s when, as curator Stephanie Rosenthal puts it, "artists began exploring the world through their bodies as well as through their eyes". As well as dance inspired by Morris's minimalist sculpture and a re-creation of an early "happening" by master assemblagist Allan Kaprow, Move boasts The Fact of the Matter, an installation by William Forsythe that makes its spectators become dancers by having them swing and clamber through a forest of gymnast rings.

Morris performed in many Judson works but also choreographed four of his own. Rainer remembers these as "beautiful pieces" in which Morris's dance language evolved through an unusual method: the performers shunting and shoving huge, free-standing wooden structures about the stage.

But the choreographers were just as fascinated by the visual artists. Rainer tried to find the dance equivalent of Morris's sculpture, his simple objects and pared-down forms. In We Shall Run, she created a seven-minute piece from 12 dancers running in patterns around the floor.

"There were just so many ideas floating around," says Lucinda Childs, another Judson choreographer. "I grabbed on to Bob Morris's minimalism but pop art was fascinating to me, too." Her solo work Carnation was the performance equivalent of one of Rauschenberg's "combines", or works assembled from seemingly random images and objects. Childs, a meticulously beautiful dancer, enacted a grave but nonsensical ritual that involved assembling a hat out of hair curlers and a colander, and making a weeping assault on a blue plastic bag.

"I was always trying to shock the others at Judson," says Deborah Hay, another choreographer. "Trying to make them go, 'Is that really dance?' It was a blast." But, despite the free trafficking of ideas and opportunities, there was one sense in which the dancers felt inferior to the artists. "They had so much more pull than us," says Rainer, "because of their contacts with powerful galleries and critics. Bob Rauschenberg was the most powerful. In fact, it was through him that we began to get invitations to perform elsewhere. In a sense, we were the dancing girls who were brought in at the tail of the meteor."

It didn't last. In the mid 60s, as pivotal members began to go off to explore their own projects, the Judson collective unravelled. But the conceptual links that were forged between them have proved much more durable. Move not only includes work from the Judson era but a huge variety of material built on its foundation in the decades that followed.

## Backwards and in the nude

All the issues that so preoccupied Rauschenberg, Rainer and their peers, such as the blurred divide between artist and performer, the relationship between body and space, the possibility of turning gesture into art, remain provocatively alive in the contributions to Move – including the latest work from Spanish performance artist La Ribot, which provides a detailed list of instructions to the spectators, suggesting actions to perform as they watch.

But one of the most telling examples of the power that Judson has wielded over the contemporary art world is Trio A, a work Rainer choreographed in 1966. The piece, which will be danced at the Hayward once a week, involves a four-and-a-half-minute phrase of movement, performed in a studiously neutral fashion with dancer or dancers averting their eyes from the audience. Over the years, it has been staged in many ways: nude, backwards, as an hour-long solo. Even at its first showing it acquired a degree of notoriety. Rainer had made the decision to have wooden slats thrown loudly on to the side of the stage throughout, causing one irritated viewer to grab a slat, tie a white hankie to it, and signal his surrender.

"Now," Rainer says, "Trio A has become a kind of fetish," and she has started keeping a catalogue of how it has been used in other people's work: there was a collection of paintings by a Norwegian artist, each one inspired by its moves; and a piece of New York performance art in which a film of Rainer dancing was screened alongside four hip-hoppers from Harlem attempting the choreography. "That was a disaster," she grins.

But Rainer also has plans of her own. Soon to turn 76, she is going to dance the work again herself, live. "It will involve a new kind of effort with grunts and groans attached," she says. "It will be a whole new form. I'm going to call it Geriatric Trio A."

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[< back](#)

[previous listing](#) • [next listing](#)