

For Immediate Release
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MERCE CUNNINGHAM TRUST ANNOUNCES MORGAN AMIRAH BURNS AND ALEX LARSON AS RECIPIENTS OF THE INAUGURAL BARBARA ENSLEY AWARD, PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG BIPOC DANCE ARTISTS LAUNCHING PROFESSIONAL CAREERS

Award Named in Honor of Longtime Merce Cunningham Studio Faculty Member Barbara Ensley (1936-2021)

Awardee Receives Grant of \$10,000 in Addition to Mentorship and Training

The Merce Cunningham Trust today announces **Morgan Amirah Burns** and **Alex Larson** as the recipients of the **Barbara Ensley Award**, inaugurated this year with the aim of expanding opportunities for BIPOC dance artists to engage with and benefit from the legacy of Merce Cunningham, and to provide the resources and stability to explore and participate in the broader New York City dance community. The award is named in honor of Merce Cunningham Studio faculty member **Barbara Ensley** (1936-2021), who taught the Fundamentals class taken by incoming students. The award furthers the Trust's mission to share the legacy of Merce Cunningham as broadly as possible and to promote an environment of belonging and inclusion. The award offers \$10,000 and a package of non-financial support and mentoring to young BIPOC dance artists making the transition from college-level training programs to professional dance careers. The award period runs for six months, during which time the recipients are based in New York City.

Patricia Lent, Merce Cunningham Trust Director of Licensing and Ensley Award Liaison, said, "Both Morgan and Alex have articulated clear artistic goals and a vision for how this award will help them progress toward those goals. We are thrilled to support these young artists, and to honor Barbara Ensley for decades of insightful, passionate teaching."

Ken Tabachnick, Executive Director of the Trust, said, "This Award represents the Trust's commitment to sharing the Cunningham legacy with future practitioners as they pursue their artistic vision and path. The Trustees are firmly committed to building a sustainable diverse dance ecology in which the legacy has a place. Alex and Morgan are the perfect initial awardees for this support."

Morgan Amirah Burns is a multi-disciplinary artist who originally hails from Atlanta and graduated with a BFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. She recently founded the Collegiate Association for Artists of Color (C.A.A.C.), a grassroots organization started by and for young American artists of color pursuing a higher education in the Arts. Morgan was also awarded a Moving Woman Residency from Brooklyn-based dance company GALLIM to explore and create movement investigating facets of her in-progress film, *In Her Shoes*. Alex Larson will complete his pre-professional training at University of Hartford's Hartt School and receive his BFA in June 2022. Alex also has a great love for teaching dance. He has developed his own specialized class

for pre-teens and teenagers, “Contemporary and Modern Fusion.” He is passionate about improvisation, collaboration, and mindfulness through dancing.

In addition to the \$10,000 grant, each recipient will:

- be paired with a mentor—offering a bridge to the professional dance community, and a space for periodic discussion and reflection, inquiry and self-evaluation. The mentor will receive an honorarium from the Trust.
- have unlimited free access to the Trust’s daily Cunningham Technique classes, with the aim of cultivating a consistent physical practice and building a “home base.”
- be encouraged to broaden their training and exposure by attending classes and workshops at other studios and venues.

Recipients may incorporate into their programs numerous other ways to develop their professional skills and deepen their relationship to Merce Cunningham’s legacy. They will be invited to participate free of charge in periodic Cunningham repertory and chance operations workshops as well as being encouraged to participate in other workshops and programs throughout the city. They will be given access to Cunningham archival materials (video, choreographic notes, photographs, performance records, etc.), and guidance in studying and analyzing these materials—including introductions to individuals with expertise in particular areas of interest. The Barbara Ensley Award also grants the opportunity to work with an authorized MCT stager to learn a Cunningham solo, which may be publicly performed and/or used for audition purposes. They may also work with an authorized MCT stager to study a Cunningham solo as a tool for developing choreographic skills and/or creating original choreography and pursue other areas of special interest that emerge over the course of the program.

Barbara Ensley, who was selected by Cunningham to teach at his studio, was the primary teacher of the Fundamentals class, and the first teacher for countless newcomers to the studio. She is remembered for welcoming and encouraging new students, and for providing a thorough and insightful introduction to Cunningham Technique. “Barbara’s time at the studio, spanning so many years, was a gift outright to the Merce Cunningham community of artists,” said Diane Frank, who served on the faculty with Ensley.

The award, to be offered annually, was developed with the help of an advisory group that includes Kyle Abraham, Michael Cole, Neil Greenberg, Shayla-Vie Jenkins, Patricia Lent, Keith Sabado, and Andrea Weber. The two recipients were selected by a review panel following an open application process. Both Ms. Burns and Mr. Larson plan to begin their six-month award period in June 2022.

About the Recipients



Morgan Amirah Burns is a 22-year old Brooklyn based multi-disciplinary artist. Originally from Atlanta, GA, Morgan has trained rigorously as a dance artist since she was a young girl. At just 20 years-old, she received her BFA in dance from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in May 2020. There, she worked with and performed works by Wayne McGregor, Ron K. Brown, and Lar Lubovitch, to name a few. As an undergraduate, Morgan studied abroad at the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance in Austria; at Toscana Dance Hub (now W.A.D.E.) in Florence, Italy; San Francisco Conservatory of Dance; and GAGA Lab NYC. In the

summer of 2021, she was awarded a Moving Woman Residency from Brooklyn-based dance company GALLIM, where she worked in the studio for a week during the pandemic investigating facets of her video work-in-progress *In Her Shoes*. Most recently, through the Consulate General of Canada, she created and collaborated with Canadian artist, Brandon Wint to create *Spring Promises Futures* (2021), a dance poetry film exploring themes of identity and location. Morgan is continuing her artistic practices studying filmmaking and furthering her improvisational and choreographic disciplines. She is incredibly grateful for this honor as it allows her to move forward in her training and career as a young dancer, creator, and artist living in New York City.



Alex Larson is originally from Portland, Oregon where he began dancing at the age of ten under the direction of Carene Boersma. Alex has now obtained three years of pre-professional training from the University of Hartford's Hartt School and is set to graduate with a BFA in Dance Performance in 2022. Alex has performed in premiere works such as *Live and Thrive* by Sir Richard Alston, *The Peculiar Terror of Wonder* by Stephen Pier, and *True Meridian* by Gabrielle Lamb. He has also performed in restaged pieces such as *The Winged* by José Limón, *3 Epitaphs* by Paul Taylor as well as a Cunningham MinEvent staged by Andrea Weber. Alex has a great love for both performing and teaching dance. Last summer he taught at a local studio in Oregon what he calls his "Contemporary and Modern Fusion" class to students ages 10 to 18. Alex is very passionate about improvisation, collaboration, and mindfulness through dancing.

About Barbara Ensley

Barbara Jean Ensley (1936 – 2021), born in Birmingham, Alabama, on August 27, was passionate about the arts and dance education. After graduating from Howard University, she began her career, studying and performing with Ethel Butler, in Washington, DC. She also studied with Martha Graham, David Wood, Donald McKayle, Alvin Ailey, Jean Leon Destine, and Louis Horst at the College Summer School of Dance in New London, Connecticut. In New York, where she spent the latter part of her life, Barbara performed primarily with Judith Dunn and choreographers Elaine Shipman, Majorie Gamso, Jeff Duncan, Jack Croll, and Tina Cross. She often spoke passionately of the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio in New York where she studied and taught for many years. She was known for teaching the fundamentals of Cunningham Technique with clarity, generosity, and vigor.

Barbara taught all her students to believe they could dance and enjoy the language of dance. In 1984, she started the Creative Dance Program at P.S. 36 in Manhattan, where she taught dance/movement education, and integrated language arts from different cultures. She was a conscientious, skillful, and effective teacher and received numerous awards for her work. Barbara received a Certificate of Appreciation for her ongoing fight against hatred and intolerance in America that placed her name on the Wall of Tolerance in Montgomery, Alabama. After retirement from teaching in the NYC Public School System, she had time to focus on other pursuits such as studying French, practicing Pilates, photography, and writing short stories and poetry with the goal of having her work published in children's books.

Merce Cunningham Studio Faculty Remember Barbara Ensley

Mary Lisa Burns: “For many years, Barbara taught the evening Fundamentals class that was the gateway to all other levels. She was an avid supporter of Merce’s work and an important part of the fabric of the Cunningham community for many years.”

Diane Frank: “Her teaching had clarity and passion. Her warmth was genuine, a steady constant in a shifting and intense artistic center. Barbara’s time at the studio, spanning so many years, was a gift outright to the Merce Cunningham community of artists.”

Catherine Kerr: “Barbara was a buoyant, kind, and intelligent spirit around the studio.”

June Finch: “Fun to talk to and quick to laughter, she was thoroughly dedicated to Merce and his work—and he to her as the right person for the job!”

About the Merce Cunningham Trust

The Merce Cunningham Trust was established by Merce Cunningham in 2000 and recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit foundation in 2002. The Trust serves as the custodian of the work of Merce Cunningham and its mission is to preserve, enhance, and maintain the integrity of that choreographic and other artistic work, and make such works available for the benefit of the public. In 2012, the Trust established headquarters at New York’s City Center.

The Trust offers a program of classes and activities, including daily classes in Cunningham Technique® at New York’s City Center and the Cunningham Fellowship, awarded to former Company members to reconstruct a Cunningham work during a multi-week intensive workshop. The Trust licenses Cunningham works to leading dance companies and educational institutions worldwide, and partners with cultural institutions to mount special projects, performances, and exhibitions that celebrate Cunningham’s artistic achievements.

From September 2018 through the end of 2019, the Trust celebrated the 100th anniversary of Merce Cunningham’s birth, honoring a century of artistic expression through events, presentations, and discussions about Cunningham, dance, and his influence on culture.

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