

Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) was a celebrated dancer and choreographer renowned for his groundbreaking work, his lifelong passion for innovation, and his profound influence on generations of dancemakers and artists. Born in Centralia, Washington, he attended the Cornish School in Seattle where he was introduced to the work of Martha Graham and met the composer John Cage who would become his closest collaborator and life partner. In 1939, Cunningham began a six-year tenure as a soloist in the Graham company, and soon began presenting his own choreography most notably on joint music and dance concerts with Cage. In the summer of 1953, during a teaching residency at Black Mountain College, Cunningham formed a dance company to explore his innovative ideas. Over the course of his seventy-year career he choreographed 180 dances including such iconic works as *Suite for Five*, *Summerspace*, *RainForest*, *Sounddance*, *Pictures*, *Beach Birds*, *BIPED*, and *Ocean*. He also presented nearly 800 Events in museums, gymnasiums, outdoor stages and theaters, beginning in 1964 with the *Museum Event No. 1* at the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts. Cunningham premiered his final work, *Nearly Ninety*, on his ninetieth birthday. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company remained in continuous operation until its closure in 2011, giving nearly three thousand performances in over forty countries.

In collaboration with John Cage, Cunningham proposed a series of radical ideas including the separation of music and dance, the use of chance operations, and novel ways to utilize film and technology. He collaborated with such renowned artists and composers as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, and Takehisa Kosugi. Cunningham earned some of the highest honors bestowed in the arts including a MacArthur Fellowship (1985), a Kennedy Center Honor (1985), a Laurence Olivier Award (1985), the National Medal of Arts (1990), and Japan's Praemium Imperiale (2005). In 2004, he was named Officier of the Legion d'Honneur. Today Cunningham's work continues to be performed by professional and student dancers worldwide, and Cunningham Technique® is taught in countless studios and educational institutions.