

SIGHTINGS | By Terry Teachout

Why Dances Disappear

Can Merce Cunningham save his work by killing his company?

New York

Merce Cunningham is shutting down his world-famous dance company—after he dies. That may sound like a dog-bites-man story, but in fact it's the most surprising and significant piece of dance-related news to come along in years. Most choreographers who run dance companies do everything they can to ensure that their companies will survive them. Not Mr. Cunningham, who turned 90 in April. When he dies, his company will go on a farewell tour. Then the dancers will be given a year's pay and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company will cease to exist.

Why break up so solidly established an ensemble? Because modern-dance troupes, which are almost always dominated by a single choreographer, have a notoriously poor track record of institutional survival after their charismatic founders pass away. Mr. Cunningham, by contrast, is more interested in preserving his fragile choreographic legacy than in keeping his company afloat. His plan is to transfer the posthumous rights to his dances to a trust that will license them for performance by other companies. That way their survival will not be contingent on the continuing existence of the ensemble for which he created them.

All this may seem puzzling to those who know little about dance. Why shouldn't a classic of modern dance like Mr. Cunningham's "Septet" or "Sound-dance" be as durable as, say, a play by Tennessee Williams or a piano concerto by Béla Bartók? If Mr. Cunningham's work is *that* good, can't its long-term survival be taken for granted? The answer, alas, is no, and the reason is simple: You can write down a piano concerto, but you can't write

down a ballet. Dance notation is so complex and inexact that no choreographer has ever used it to create a new piece from scratch. In fact, most choreographers and dancers don't even know how to read dance notation, much less write it. Instead of sitting at a desk and writing down the steps of a new dance, a choreographer makes them up on the spot in a studio and personally teaches them to his dancers, who then perform them from memory on stage.

No other art form works this way. Imagine that instead of writing down his Fifth Symphony, Beethoven had taught it to the members of the Vienna Philharmonic by playing it on the piano over and over again until each musician knew his own part by heart. Now suppose that the Philharmonic liked the Fifth Symphony so much that it continued to perform the piece for the next two centuries, with each succeeding generation of players learning the score by rote

from its predecessors. Ask yourself this: What would Beethoven's Fifth sound like today? Would it still sound the same way it did in 1808, or would it have undergone dramatic changes in the process of being transmitted by ear from musician to musician? Or might it have been forgotten altogether?

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there's little point in trying. George Balanchine, the greatest choreographer of the 20th century, compared his own ballets to butterflies: "A breath, a memory, then gone." Until fairly recently, that pessimistic statement was little more than the bitter truth. By and large, 19th-century ballet is remembered more for its music than its steps, and only a handful of premodern ballets continue to be danced in anything like their original form. It wasn't until the introduction

of videotape in the '60s that it became easy to make a permanent record of a dance—and a two-dimensional video image can do little more than suggest the all-encompassing visual effect of a live performance of a large-scale ballet.

For a dance to last, it must be performed regularly, not just by its creator's own company but by troupes of every other kind and persuasion. This means that it will change over time, as a result of the imperfect memories of its performers and for other reasons as well. Take a look at photographs of the ballet dancers of a century ago and you'll be struck by how chunky their bodies were. Not only are today's dancers thinner than their predecessors, but they can also move faster, the same way that Mike Powell could jump farther in 1991 than Jesse Owens could in 1935.

Mr. Cunningham understands all this. "My pieces, whatever they're worth, can easily enough be forgotten not only for what they were but because as time continues, something else is happening ... which will push dance in different directions," he recently told a New York Times reporter. So instead of trying to keep his company alive in order to preserve his dances "as is," he's going to send them out into the world and let them make their own way. That sounds very much like the decision of a wise parent, one who loves his children, trusts them to do the right thing—and knows that, sooner or later, they'll have to fend for themselves.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, writes "Sightings" every other Saturday and blogs about the arts at www.terryteachout.com. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.