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Review: At MoMA, Dances by Steve Paxton, an Original Too Rarely Seen



Nicholas Sciscione in one of the suites of dances set to Glenn Gould playing Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. Photographs by Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By Alastair Macaulay

For more than 50 years, some spark of divine fire has kept touching [the dancer-choreographer Steve Paxton](#). In the 1960s, he performed with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and Judson Dance Theater. He created roles in epoch-making dances in both; his collaborations with the artist Robert Rauschenberg were among the bold experiments of the decade.

In the 1970s, when Mr. Paxton was a founder of the improvisational group Grand Union, he developed contact improvisation, which became an international genre. Mr. Paxton's contact improv showed the drama that could emerge from the ways one person's weight could be taken by others in continually changing negotiations. In the

1980s, he began solo improvisations to Glenn Gould's recording of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations, moving to classical music in often unorthodox ways, and with disarming freshness.

In 2010, he danced the world premiere of his solo ["The Beast" in a program shared with the still-phenomenal Mikhail Baryshnikov](#). Mr. Paxton's uncompromising and unpretty toughness, his stark objectivity about showing basic qualities and facts of movement in new lights, were fully as momentous as — and more haunting than — anything Mr. Baryshnikov showed that evening.



Members of the Stephen Petronio Company performing Steve Paxton's 1964 dance "Jag Vill Gärna Telefonera (I Would Like to Make a Telephone Call)."

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Yet Mr. Paxton has spent much of his career far from the madding crowd; a great many dancegoers have never seen his work. We're fortunate that [the choreographer Stephen Petronio](#), who was his student in the early 1980s, has, with several first-rate dancers, reconstructed a 45-minute program of Paxton choreography from the years 1964-92 for the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done." Mr. Paxton is one of his field's great originals; Mr. Petronio and his dancers do him honor in this program.

These dances evolve like studies in suspense. Non sequiturs and unforeseen twists abound. They cleanse the palate, inventively taking us into the detail both of basic movement and of aspects of non-virtuoso dance technique. In view of Mr. Paxton's reputation for intensity and seriousness, it's surprising to find how often they're playful and witty.

On Sunday, I was struck by a single gamboling jump taken by Ernesto Breton, throwing one forearm in the air, then the other, while skipping from foot to foot. And by the way two men in a duet propped each other up while both leaning off-balance in straight lines — like the mainstays of a steep roof — then, while keeping this position, started to turn and turn. And by how Bria Bacon, lying on her back, sternly propelled herself along the floor by using her heels as hooks that pulled the rest of her body toward them.



Megan Wright in her suite of "Goldberg Variations."
Photographs by Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

These images come from "Jag Vill Gärna Telefonera (I Would Like to Make a Telephone Call)," a 1964 dance that Mr. Paxton originally performed with Rauschenberg and which Mr. Paxton taught to Mr. Petronio, who has made this new arrangement of it. I love its spirit as much as its facts; and the objective clarity with which these dancers perform it is exciting.

Just as riveting are the two suites of dances from the Paxton “Goldberg Variations.” Variations 16-24 are performed by Megan Wright and by Nicholas Sciscione. The effects made by these two dancers are interestingly unlike. They both begin by walking around the space to music, while rubbing white make up, like a mask, onto their faces: a perfect touch of theatrical alienation.

[Mr. Sciscione](#), shirtless, makes a knockout impression in the solo in which he seems to be dancing almost entirely with the muscles in his back. This is actually a full-bodied dance involving head, legs and arms, but what’s startling is how much detail Mr. Sciscione ([who danced this work in a 2017 program at the Joyce Theater](#)) brings into play between shoulders and hips, all metrically responding to the keyboard. Ms. Wright, wearing a white undershirt, can’t show us the same interplay of musculature, yet we’re soon aware how much texture her torso is bringing to this number, how juicily it ripples and tilts.

Other variations here are danced with higher energy: Bach’s music is answered by jumps, gestures, turns and other motion. The style is informal and sometimes fascinatingly awkward, as if a musical impulse in one part of the body directed other parts of the body to move helplessly. The head often has a life of its own, bending up and down and side to side in circles. These movements come in long rhythmic skeins that meet Bach’s music with strangely satisfying phraseology.

Steve Paxton, 1964-1992

Through Dec. 15 at the Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan; moma.org.

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